MISTRESS NELL

OR

A MERRY TALE OF A MERRY TIME

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MISTRESS NELL

MISTRESS NELL

A MERRY TALE OF A MERRY TIME

('Twixt Fact and Fancy)

By *GEORGE C. HAZELTON*, Jr.
Author of the Play

"*Let not poor Nelly starve.*"

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A WORD

IT is the vogue to dramatize successful novels. The author of the present Nell Gwyn story has pursued the contrary course. His "merry" play of the same name was written and produced before he undertook to compose this tale, suggested by the same historic sources.

A word of tribute is gratefully given to the *comédienne*, Miss Crosman, whose courage and exquisite art introduced the "Mistress Nell" of the play to the public.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I 1

"And once Nell Gwyn, a frail young sprite,
Look'd kindly when I met her;
I shook my head perhaps — but quite
Forgot to quite forget her."

CHAPTER II 10

It's near your cue, Mistress Nell!

CHAPTER III 41

He took them from Castlemaine's hand to throw to you.

CHAPTER IV 62

Flowers and Music feed naught but Love.

CHAPTER V 87

It was never treason to steal a King's kisses.

CHAPTER VI 101

Softly on tiptoe;
Here Nell doth lie.

CHAPTER VII 111

Come down!
Come up!

CHAPTER VIII 126

"And the man that is drunk is as great as a king."

CHAPTER IX 142

Three chickens!

MISTRESS NELL

"And once Nell Gwyn, a frail young sprite,
Look'd kindly when I met her;
I shook my head perhaps—but quite
Forgot to quite forget her."

IT was a merry time in merry old England; for King Charles II. was on the throne.

Not that the wines were better or the ladies fairer in his day, but the renaissance of carelessness and good-living had set in. True Roundheads again sought quiet abodes in which to worship in their gray and sombre way. Cromwell, their uncrowned king, was dead; and there was no place for his followers at court or in tavern. Even the austere and Catholic smile of brother James of York, one day to be the ruler of the land, could not cast a gloom over the assemblies at Whitehall. There were those to laugh merrily at the

King's wit, and at the players' wit. There were those in abundance to enjoy to-day —to-day only,—to drink to the glorious joys of to-day, with no care for the morrow.

It was, indeed, merry old England; for, when the King has no cares, and assumes no cares, the people likewise have no cares. The state may be rent, the court a nest of intrigue, King and Parliament at odds, the treasury bankrupt: but what care they; for the King cares not. Is not the day prosperous? Are not the taverns in remotest London filled with roistering spirits who drink and sing to their hearts' content of their deeds in the wars just done? Can they not steal when hungry and demand when dry?

Aye, the worldly ones are cavaliers now —for a cavalier is King—e'en though the sword once followed Cromwell and the gay cloak and the big flying plume do not quite hide the not-yet-discarded cuirass of an Ironside.

Cockpits and theatres! It is the Restoration! The maypole is up again at May-

pole Lane, and the milk-maids bedecked with garlands dance to the tunes of the fiddle. Boys no longer serve for heroines at the play, as was the misfortune in Shakespeare's day. The air is full of hilarity and joy.

Let us too for a little hour forget responsibility and fall in with the spirit of the times; while we tipple and toast, and vainly boast: "The King! Long live the King!"

Old Drury Lane was alive as the sun was setting, on the day of our visit to London Town, with loungers and loafers; busy-bodies and hawkers; traffickers of sweets and other petty wares; swaggering soldiers, roistering by, stopping forsooth to throw kisses to inviting eyes at the windows above.

As we turn into Little Russell Street from the Lane, passing many chairs richly made, awaiting their fair occupants, we come upon the main entrance to the King's House. Not an imposing or spacious structure to be sure, it nevertheless was suited to the managerial purposes of

the day, which were, as now, to spend as little and get as much as may be. The pit was barely protected from the weather by a glazed cupola; so that the audience could not always hear the sweetest song to a finish without a drenching, or dwell upon the shapeliness of the prettiest ankle, that revealed itself in the dance by means of candles set on cressets, which in those days sadly served the purposes of foot-lights.

It was Dryden's night. His play was on —"The Conquest of Granada." The best of London were there; for a first night then was as attractive as a first night now. In the balcony were draped boxes, in which lovely gowns were seen—lovely hair and lovely gems; but the fair faces were often masked.

The King sat listless in the royal box, watching the people and the play or passing pretty compliments with the fair favourites by his side, diverted, perchance, by the ill-begotten quarrel of some fellow with a saucy orange-wench over the cost of her golden wares. The true gallants preferred being robbed to haggling—for the shame of it.

A knowing one in the crowd was heard to say: "'T is Castlemaine to the King's left."

"No, 't is Madame Carwell; curse her," snarled a more vulgar companion.

"Madame Querouaille, knave, Duchess of Portsmouth," irritably exclaimed a handsome gallant, himself stumbling somewhat over the French name, though making a bold play for it, as he passed toward his box, pushing the fellow aside. He added a moment later, but so that no one heard: "Portsmouth is far from here."

It was the Duke of Buckingham — the great Duke of Buckingham, in the pit of the King's House! Truly, we see strange things in these strange times! Indeed, William Penn himself did not hesitate to gossip with the orange-wenches, unless Pepys lied — and Pepys never lied.

"What said he?" asked a stander-by, a butcher, who, with apron on and sleeves to elbow, had hastily left his stall at one of the afternoon and still stood with mouth agape and fingers widespread waiting for the play. Before, however, his sooty com-

panion could answer, they were jostled far apart.

The crowd struggled for places in eager expectation, amid banter none too virtuous, whistlings and jostlings. The time for the play had arrived. "Nell! Nell! Nell!" was on every lip.

And who was "Nell"?

From amidst the players, lords and coxcombs crowded on the stage stepped forth Nell Gwyn — the prettiest rogue in merry England.

A cheer went up from every throat; for the little vixen who stood before them had long reigned in the hearts of Drury Lane and the habitués of the King's House.

Yea, all eyes were upon the pretty, witty Nell; the one-time orange-girl; now queen of the theatre, and the idol of the Lane. Her curls were flowing and her big eyes dancing beneath a huge hat — more, indeed, a canopy than a hat — so large that the audience screamed with delight at the incongruity of it and the pretty face beneath.

This pace in foolery had been set at the Duke's House, but Nell out-did them, with her broad-brimmed hat as large as a cart-wheel and her quaint waist-belt; for was not her hat larger by half than that at the rival house and her waist-belt quainter?

As she came forward to speak the prologue, her laugh too was merrier and more roguish:

"*This jest was first of the other house's making,*
And, five times tried, has never fail'd of taking;
. . . . . .
This is that hat, whose very sight did win ye
To laugh and clap as though the devil were in ye.
. . . . . .
I'll write a play, says one, for I have got
A broad-brimm'd hat, and waist-belt, towards a plot.
Says the other, I have one more large than that,
Thus they out-write each other with a hat!
The brims still grew with every play they writ;
And grew so large, they cover'd all the wit.
Hat was the play; 't was language, wit, and tale:
Like them that find meat, drink, and cloth in ale."

The King leaned well out over the box-rail, his dark eyes intent upon Nell's face.

A fair hand, however, was placed impatiently upon his shoulder and drew him gently back. "Lest you fall, my liege."

"Thanks, Castlemaine," he replied, kindly but knowingly. "You are always thoughtful."

The play went on. The actors came and went. Hart appeared in Oriental robes as Almanzor—a dress which mayhap had served its purposes for Othello, and mayhap had not; for cast-off court-dresses, without regard to fitness, were the players' favourite costumes in those days, the richness more than the style mattering.

With mighty force, he read from the centre of the stage, with elocution true and syllable precise, Dryden's ponderous lines. The King nodded approvingly to the poet. The poet glowed with pride at the patronage of the King. The old-time audience were enchanted. Dryden sat with a triumphant smile as he dwelt upon his poetic lines and heard the cherished syllables receive rounds of applause from the Londoners.

Was it the thought, dear Dryden; or was it Nell's pretty ways that bewitched the most of it? Nell's laugh still echoes in the world; but where are your plays, dear Dryden?

CHAPTER II

It's near your cue, Mistress Nell!

THE greenroom of the King's House was scarcely a prepossessing place or inviting. A door led to the stage; another to the street. On the remaining doors might have been deciphered from the Old English of a scene-artist's daub "Mistress Gwyn" and "Mr. Hart." These doors led respectively to the tiring-room of the sweet sprite who had but now set the pit wild with a hat over a sparkling eye and to that of the actor-manager of the House. A rough table, a few chairs, a mirror which had evidently seen better days in some grand mansion and a large throne-chair which might equally well have satisfied the royalty of Macbeth or Christopher Sly—its royalty, forsooth, being in its size, for thus only could it lord-it over its mates—stood in the corner. Old armour hung upon the wall, grim in the

light of candles fixed in braziers. Rushes were strewn about the floor.

Ah! Pepys, Pepys, was it here that you recalled "specially kissing of Nell"? Mayhap; for we read in your book: "I kissed her, and so did my wife, and a mighty pretty soul she is." Be that as it may, however, you must have found Nell's lips very agreeable; for a great wit has suggested that it was well that Mrs. Pepys was present on the occasion.

On great play-nights, however, this most unroyal room assumed the proportions of royalty. Gallants and even lords sought entrance here and elbowed their way about; and none dared say them nay. They forced a way even upon the stage during the play, though not so commonly as before the Restoration, yet still too much; and the players played as best they could, and where best they could. *Billets-doux* passed, sweet words were said,—all in this dilapidated, unpretentious, candle-lighted room.

At the moment of which we speak, the greenroom was deserted save for a lad of

twelve or fourteen years, who stood before the mirror, posing to his personal satisfaction and occasionally delivering bits from "Hamlet." He was none other than "Dick," the call-boy of the King's House.

The lad struck a final attitude, his brow clouded. He assumed what seemed to him the proper pose for the royal Dane. His meditations and his pose, however, were broken in upon by the sudden entrance of Manager Hart, flushed and in an unusual state of excitement.

"Where is my dagger, Dick?" he exclaimed, pacing the room.

The boy came to himself but slowly.

"What are you doing? Get my dagger, boy," wildly reiterated the irate manager. "Don't you see there will be a stage-wait?" He cast an anxious glance in the direction of the door which led to the stage.

"Where did you leave it, sir?" asked the lad, finally realizing that it would be wise not to trifle at such a time.

"Never mind where I left it. Get it, get it; do you hear! Nell's on the stage

already." Hart rushed to the door and looked off in an increasing state of excitement.

"Why, you've got your dagger on, sir," hesitatingly suggested the lad, as he caught the gleam of a small scimiter among the folds of Almanzor's tunic.

Hart's face flushed.

"Devil take you, boy," he exclaimed; "you are too stupid ever to make an actor!"

With this speech, the manager strode out of the greenroom toward the stage.

Poor Dick sank back in an attitude of resignation. "How long, O Rome, must I endure this bondage?" he said, sadly.

He again observed his boyish figure in the mirror, and the pretty face brightened as he realized that there might still be hope in life, despite Manager Hart's assertion that he would never be able to act. His features slowly sank into a set expression of tremendous gloom, such as he thought should characterize his conception of himself as Hamlet when in days to come the mantles of Burbage and

of Betterton should be his and Manager Hart must bow to him. He stood transfixed before the glass in a day-dream, forgetful of his ills. His pretty lips moved, and one close by might have heard again, "To be or not to be" in well-modulated phrase.

"Ah, boy; here!"

Dick started.

It was a richly dressed gallant, in old-rose with royal orders, who had entered the room quietly but authoritatively from the street—the same lordly personage we observed in the pit. His manner was that of one accustomed to be obeyed and quickly too. The lad knew him and bowed low.

"Tell Mistress Nell, Buckingham would speak with her. Lively, lad; lively," he said.

"She is on the stage, my lord," replied Dick, respectfully.

"Gad, I thought otherwise and stepped about from my box. Here; put these flowers in her tiring-room."

The boy took the beautiful bouquet

of white roses. "Yes, my lord," he replied, and turned to do the bidding.

"Flowers strewn in ladies' ways oft' lead to princely favours," muttered his lordship, thoughtfully, as he removed his gloves and vainly adjusted his hat and sword. "Portsmouth at Dover told me that."

It was apparent from his face that much passed before his mind, in that little second, of days when, at Dover Castle not long since, he had been a part —and no small part—of the intrigue well planned by Louis of France, and well executed by the Duchess of Orléans assisted by the fair Louise, now Duchess of Portsmouth, in which his own purse and power had waxed mightily. Whatever his lordship thought, however, it was gone like the panorama before a drowning brain.

He stopped the lad as he was entering Nell's tiring-room, with an exclamation. The boy returned.

"You gave Mistress Nell my note bidding her to supper?" he asked, questioningly.

"I did, my lord," answered Dick.

"'Sheart, a madrigal worthy of Bacchus! She smiled delightedly?" continued his lordship, in a jocular mood.

"No, my lord; quite serious."

His lordship's face changed slightly. "Read it eagerly?" he ventured, where he might have commanded, further to draw out the lad.

"Yes, my lord," added Dick, respectfully, "after a time." The boy's lids dropped to avoid revealing his amused recollection of the incident; and his lordship's quick eye noted it.

"Good!" he exclaimed, with an assumed triumphant air. "She folded it carefully and placed it in her bosom next her heart?"

"She threw it on the floor, my lord!" meekly answered Dick, hiding his face in the flowers to avoid revealing disrespect.

"My *billet-doux* upon the floor!" angrily exclaimed his lordship. "Plague on't, she said something, made some answer, boy?" The diplomat was growing

earnest despite himself, as diplomats often do in the cause of women.

Dick trembled.

"She said your dinners made amends for your company, my lord," he said, meekly.

Buckingham's eyes snapped; but he was too clever to reveal his feelings further to a call-boy, whom he dismissed with a wave of the hand. He then swaggered to the table and complacently exclaimed: "The rogue! Nelly, Nelly, your lips shall pay tribute for that. Rosy impudence! Buckingham's dinners make amends for his company? Minx!" He threw himself into a chair, filled with deep reflections of supper and wine, wit and beauty, rather than state-craft.

Thus lost in selfish reflection, he did not observe, or, if he did, cared not for, the frail figure and sweet face of one who cautiously tiptoed into the greenroom. It was Orange Moll, whose sad countenance and tattered garments betokened a sadder story. Her place was in the pit, with her back to the stage, vending her

oranges to artisans, girls with vizards or foolish gallants. She had no right behind the scenes.

"I am 'most afraid to enter here without Nell," she thought, faint-heartedly, as she glanced about the room and her eyes fell upon the great Lord Buckingham.

"Oranges? Will you have my oranges? Only sixpence, my lord," she ventured at length, then hesitatingly advanced and offered her wares; but his lordship's thoughts were far away.

"What shall we have for supper?" was his sole concern. "I think Nelly would like spiced tongue." Instantly his hands and eyes were raised in mock invocation of the intervention of the Powers that Be, and so suddenly that Moll drew back. "Ye Gods," he exclaimed aloud, "she has enough of that already! Ah, the vintage of—"

It was more habit than courage which brought to Moll's trembling lips the familiar orange-cry, which again interrupted him: "Oranges; only sixpence. Here is one picked for you, my lord."

Buckingham's eyes flashed with anger; he was not wont to have his way, much less his pleasure, disturbed by the lowly. "Oh, hang you, you disturb me. I am thinking; don't you perceive I am thinking? Begone!"

"Only sixpence, my lord; I have not sold one to-night," pleaded the girl, sadly.

His lordship rose irritably. "I have no pauper's pence," he exclaimed. "Out of my way! Ragbag!" He pushed the girl roughly aside and crossed the room.

At the same instant, there was confusion at the stage-door, the climax of which was the re-entrance of Hart into the greenroom.

"How can a man play when he trembles for his life lest he step upon a lord?" cried the angry manager. "They should be horsewhipped off the stage, and" — his eyes falling upon Buckingham — "out of the greenroom."

"Ah, Hart," began his lordship, with a patronizing air, "why is Nelly so long? I desire to see her."

Hart's lips trembled, but he controlled

his passion. "Indeed? His Majesty and the good folk in front would doubtless gladly await your interview with Mistress Eleanor Gwyn. Shall I announce your will, my lord, unto his Majesty and stop the play?"

"You grow ironical, friend Hart," replied his lordship.

"Not so," said the actor, bowing low; "I am your lordship's most obedient servant."

Buckingham's lip curled and his eyes revealed that he would have said more, but the room was meantime filling with players from the stage, some exchanging compliments, some strutting before the glass, and he would not so degrade his dignity before them. Dick, foil in hand even in the manager's room, was testing the steel's strength to his utmost, in boyish fashion.

This confusion lent Moll courage, and forth came again the cry: "Oranges? Will you have my oranges? Only sixpence, sir."

She boldly offered her wares to Al-

manzor, but started and paled when the hero turned and revealed Manager Hart.

"What are you doing here, you little imp? Back to the pit, where you belong." The manager's voice was full of meaning.

"Nell told me I might come here, sir," said the girl, faintly excusing herself.

Hart's temper got the better of him. To admit before all that Nell ruled the theatre was an affront to his managerial dignity which he could not brook.

"Oh, Nell did, did she?" he almost shrieked, as he angrily paced the room like some caged beast, gesticulating wildly.

The actors gathered in groups and looked askant.

"Gadso," he continued, "who is manager, I should like to know! Nell would introduce her whole trade here if she could. Every orange-peddler in London will set up a stand in the greenroom at the King's, next we know. Out with you! This is a temple of art, not a marketplace. Out with you!"

He seized Moll roughly in his anger and almost hurled her out at the door. He would have done so, indeed, had not Nell entered at this moment from the stage. Her eye caught the situation at a glance.

"Oh, blood, Iago, blood!" she exclaimed, mock-heroically, then burst into the merriest laugh that one could care to hear. "How now, a tragedy in the greenroom! What lamb is being sacrificed?"

Hart stood confused; the players whispered in expectation; and an amused smile played upon the features of my Lord Buckingham at the manager's discomfiture. Finally Hart found his tongue.

"An old comrade of yours at orange-vending before you lost the art of acting," he suggested, with a glance at Moll.

"By association with you, Jack?" replied the witch of the theatre in a way which bespoke more answers that wisdom best not bring forth.

Nell's whole heart went out to the subject of the controversy. Poor little tattered

Orange Moll! She was carried back in an instant to her own bitter life and bitter struggles when an orange-girl. Throwing an arm about the child, she kissed away the tears with, "What is the matter, dear Moll?"

"They are all mocking me, and sent me back to the pit," replied the girl, hysterically.

"Shame on you all," said Nell; and the eyes that were so full of comedy revealed tragic fire.

"Fy, fy," pleaded Hart; "I'll be charitable to-morrow, Nell, after this strain is off—but a first night—"

"You need charity yourself?" suggested Nell; and she burst into a merry laugh, in which many joined.

Buckingham instantly took up the gauntlet for a bold play, for a *coup d'état* in flattery. "Pshaw!" he cried, waving aside the players in a princely fashion. "When Nell plays, we have no time to munch oranges. Let the wench bawl in the street."

Poor Moll's tears flowed again with

each harsh word. Nell was not so easily affected.

"Odso, my lord! It is a pity your lordship is not a player. Then the orange-trade would flourish," she said.

Buckingham bowed, amused and curious. "Say you so, i' faith! Pray, why, mad minx?"

"Your lordship would make such a good mark for the peel," retorted Nell, tossing a bit of orange-peel in his face, to the infinite delight of Hart and his fellow-players.

"Devil!" angrily exclaimed his lordship as he realized the insult. "I would kill a man for this; a woman, I can only love." His hand left his sword-hilt; and he bowed low to the vixen of the theatre, picked from the floor the bit of peel which had fallen, kissed it, tossed it over his shoulder and turned away.

Nell was not done, however; her revenge was incomplete. "There! dry your eyes, Moll," she exclaimed. "Give me your basket, child. You shall be avenged still further."

The greenroom had now filled from the stage and the tiring-rooms; and all gathered gleefully about to see what next the impish Nell would do, for avenged she would be they all knew, though the course of her vengeance none could guess.

The manager, catching at the probable outcome when Nell seized from Moll's trembling arm the basket heaped with golden fruit, gave the first warning: "Great Heavens! Flee for your lives! I' faith, here comes the veteran robber at such traffic."

There was a sudden rush for the stage, but Nell cried: "Guard the door, Moll; don't let a rascal out. I'll do the rest."

It was not Moll's strength, however, which kept the greenroom filled, but expectation of Nell. All gathered about with the suspense of a drama; for Nell herself was a whole play as she stood in the centre of that little group of lords and players, dressed for Almahyde, Dryden's heroine, with a basket of oranges on her dimpled arm. What a pretty picture she was too—

prettier here even than on the stage! The nearer, the prettier! A band of roses, one end of which formed a garland falling to the floor, circled and bound in her curls. What a figure in her Oriental garb, hiding and revealing. Indeed, the greenroom seemed bewitched by her cry: "Oranges, will you have my oranges?"

She lifted the basket high and offered the fruit in her enchanting old-time way, a way which had won for her the place of first actress in England. Could it not now dispose of Moll's wares and make the child happy? Almahyde's royal train was caught up most unroyally, revealing two dainty ankles; and she laughed and danced and disposed of her wares all in a breath. Listen and love:

Sweet as love-lips, dearest mine,
Picked by Spanish maids divine,
Black-eyed beauties, who, like Eve,
With golden fruit their loves deceive!
Buy oranges; buy oranges!

Close your eyes, when these you taste;
Think your arm about her waist:

Thus with sixpence may you win
Happiness unstained with sin.
Buy oranges; buy oranges!

As the luscious fruit you sip,
You will wager 't is her lip;
Nothing sweeter since the rise
Of wickedness in Paradise.
Buy oranges; buy oranges!

There were cries of "Brava!" "Another jig!" and "Hurrah for Nelly!" It was one of those bits of acting behind the scenes which are so rare and exquisite and which the audience never see.

"Marry, gallants, deny me after that, if you dare"; and Nell's little foot came down firmly in the last step of a triumphant jig, indicating a determination that Moll's oranges should be sold and quickly too.

"Last act! All ready for the last act," rang out in Dick's familiar voice from the stage-door as she ended. It was well some one thought of the play and of the audience in waiting.

Many of the players hastily departed to

take up their cues; but not so Nell. Her eyes were upon the lordly Buckingham, who was endeavouring to effect a crafty exit.

"Not so fast, my lord," she said as she caught his handsome cloak and drew him back into the room. "I want you with me." She looked coyly into his lordship's face as though he were the one man in all the world she loved, and her curls and cheek almost nestled against his rich cloak. "A dozen, did you say? What a heart you have, my lord. A bountiful heart!"

Buckingham was dazed; his eyes sought Nell, then looked aghast at the oranges she would force upon him. The impudence of it!

"A dozen!" he exclaimed in awe. "'Slife, Nelly; what would I do with a dozen oranges?"

"Pay for them, in sooth," promptly replied the vixen. "I never give a lord credit."

The player-folk gathered closer to watch the scene; for there was evidently

more fun brewing, and that too at the expense of a very royal gentleman.

"A player talk of credit!" replied his lordship, quite ironically, as he straightened up proudly for a wit-encounter. "What would become of the mummers, if the lords did not fill their empty pockets?" he said, crushingly.

"What would become of the lords, if the players' brains did not try to fill their empty skulls with wits?" quickly retorted Nell.

"If you were a man, sweet Nelly, I should answer: 'The lords first had fools at court; then supplanted them with players!'"

"And, being a woman, I do answer," replied the irrepressible Nell, "'—and played the fools themselves, my lord!'"

The players tried to smother their feelings; but the retort was too apt, and the greenroom rang with laughter.

Buckingham turned fiercely upon them; but their faces were instantly mummified.

"Gad, I would sooner face the Dutch

fleet, Nelly. Up go my hands, fair robber," he said. He had decided to succumb for the present. In his finger-tips glistened a golden guinea.

Nell eyed the coin dubiously.

"Nay, keep this and your wares too," added his lordship, in hope of peace, as he placed it in her hand.

"Do you think me a beggar?" replied Nell, indignantly. "Take your possessions, every one—every orange." She filled his hands and arms to overflowing with her golden wares.

His lordship winced, but stood subdued.

"What am I to do with them?" he asked, falteringly.

"Eat them; eat them," promptly and forcefully retorted the quondam orange-vender.

"All?" asked his lordship.

"All!" replied her ladyship.

"Damme, I cannot hold a dozen," he exclaimed, aghast.

"A chair! A chair!" cried Nell. "Would your lordship stand at the feast of gold?"

Before Buckingham had time to reflect upon the outrage to his dignity, Nell forced him into a chair, to the great glee of the by-standers, especially of Manager Hart, who chuckled to an actor by his side: "She'll pluck his fine feathers; curse his arrogance."

"Your knees together, my lord! What, have they never united in prayer?" gleefully laughed Nell as she further humbled his lordship by forcing his knees together to form a lap upon which to pile more oranges.

Buckingham did not relish the scene; but he was clever enough to humour the vixen, both from fear of her tongue and from hope of favours as well as words from her rosy lips.

"They'll unite to hold *thee*, wench," he suggested, with a sickly laugh, as he observed his knees well laden with oranges.

"I trow not," retorted Nell; "they can scarce hold their own. There!" and she roguishly capped the pyramid which burdened his lordship's knees with the largest in her basket.

"I'll barter these back for my change, sweet Nell," he pleaded.

"What change?" quickly cried the merry imp of Satan.

"I gave you a golden guinea," answered his lordship, woefully.

"I gave you a golden dozen, my lord!" replied Nell, gleefully.

"Oranges, who will have my oranges?"

She was done with Buckingham and had turned about for other prey.

Hart could not allow the opportunity to escape without a shot at his hated lordship.

"Fleeced," he whispered grimly over his lordship's shoulder, with a merry chuckle.

Buckingham rose angrily.

"A plague on the wench and her dealings," he said. His oranges rolled far and wide over the floor of the greenroom.

"You should be proud, my lord, to be robbed by so fair a hand," continued Hart, consolingly. "'T is an honour, I assure you; we all envy you."

Buckingham did not relish the consolation.

"'Tis an old saw, Master Hart," he replied: "'He laughs best who laughs last.'"

As he spoke, Nell's orange-cry rang out again above the confusion and the fun. She was still at it. Moll was finding vengeance and money, indeed, though she dwelt upon her accumulating possessions through eyelashes dim with tears.

"It's near your cue, Mistress Nell," cried out the watchful Dick at the stage-door.

"Six oranges left; see me sell them, Moll," cried the unheeding vender.

"It's near your cue, Mistress Nell!" again shouted the call-boy, in anxious tones.

"Marry, my cue will await my coming, pretty one," laughed Nell.

The boy was not so sure of that. "Oh, don't be late, Mistress Nell," he pleaded. "I'll buy the oranges rather than have you make a stage-wait."

"Dear heart," replied Nell, touched by the lad's solicitude. "Keep your pennies, Dick, and you and I will have a lark

with them some fine day. Six oranges left; going—going—" She sprang into the throne-chair, placed one of the smallest feet in England impudently on one of its arms and proceeded to vend her remaining wares from on high, to the huge satisfaction of her admirers.

The situation was growing serious. Nell was not to be trifled with. The actors stood breathless. Hart grew wild as he realized the difficulty and the fact that she was uncontrollable. King and Parliament, he well knew, could not move her from her whimsical purpose, much less the manager of the King's.

"What are you doing, Nell?" he pleaded, wildly. "You will ruin the first night. His Majesty in front, too! Dryden will never forgive us if 'Granada' goes wrong through our fault."

"Heyday! What care I for 'Granada'?" and Nell swung the basket of oranges high in air and calmly awaited bids. "Not a step on the stage till the basket is empty."

It was Buckingham's turn now.

"Here's music for our manager," he chuckled. "Our deepest sympathy, friend Hart."

This was more than Hart could bear. The manager of the King's House was forced into profanity. "Damn your sympathy," exclaimed he; and few would criticise him for it. He apologized as quickly, however, and turned to Nell. "There goes your scene, Nell. I'll buy your oranges, when you come off," he continued to plead, in desperation, scarcely less fearful of offending her than of offending the great Lord Buckingham.

"Now or never," calmly replied the vender from her chair-top.

"The devil take the women," muttered Hart, frantically, as he rushed headlong into his tiring-room.

"Marry, Heaven defend," laughed Nell; "for he's got the men already." She sprang lightly from the chair to the floor.

Hart was back on the instant, well out of breath but purse in hand.

"Here, here," he exclaimed. "Never

mind the oranges, wench. The audience will be waiting."

"Faith and troth, and is not Nell worth waiting for?" she cried, her eyes shining radiantly. Indeed, the audience would have gladly waited, could they have but seen her pretty, winsome way! "These are yours—all—all!" she continued, as she gleefully emptied the basket of its remaining fruit over Prince Almanzor's head.

Hart protested vainly.

Then rushing back to Moll, Nell threw both arms about the girl triumphantly. "There, Moll," she said, "is your basket and all the trophies"; and she gave Moll the basket with the glittering coins jangling in it.

"Your cue—your cue is spoken, Mistress Nell," shrieked Dick from the stage-door.

Nell heeded not. Her eyes happening upon an orange which had fallen near the throne-chair, she caught it up eagerly and hurled it at Manager Hart.

"Forsooth, here's another orange, Master Manager."

He succeeded in catching it despite his excitement.

"Your cue—your cue—Mistress Nell!" came from every throat as one.

Nell tossed back her head indifferently. "Let them wait; let them wait," she said, defiantly.

The stage-beauty crossed leisurely to the glass and carelessly arranged her drapery and the band of roses encircling her hair.

Then the hoyden was gone. In an instant, Nell was transformed into the princess, Almahyde. The room had been filled with breathless suspense; but what seemed to the players an endless period of time was but a minute. Nell turned to the manager, and with all the suavity of a princess of tragedy kissed her hand tantalizingly to him and said: "Now, Jack, I 'll teach you how to act."

She passed out, and, in a moment, rounds of applause from the amphitheatre filled the room. She was right; the audience would wait for her.

A moment later, the greenroom was

deserted except for Manager Hart and Lord Buckingham. Hart had thrown the call-boy almost bodily through the door that led to the stage, thus venting his anger upon the unoffending lad, who had been unfortunate enough to happen in his way ill betimes. He now stood vainly contemplating himself before the glass and awaiting his cue. Buckingham leaned upon a chair-top, uncertain as to his course.

"Damme! She shall rue this work," he muttered at length. "A man might as well make love to a wind-mill. I forgot to tell her how her gown becomes her. That is a careless thing to forget." The reflection forthwith determined his course. "Nelly, Nelly, Nelly," he called as he quickly crossed the room after the departed Nell, "you are divine to-night. Your gown is simply—"

The manager's voice stayed him at the stage-door. "My lord, come back; my lord—"

Buckingham's hand had gone so far, indeed, as to push open the door. He stood entranced as he looked out upon the ob-

ject of his adoration upon the stage. "Perfection!" he exclaimed. "Your eyes—"

"My lord, my lord, you forget—"

Buckingham turned indignantly at the voice which dared to interrupt him in the midst of his rhapsody.

"You forget—your oranges, my lord," mildly suggested Hart, as he pointed to the fruit scattered upon the floor.

Buckingham's face crimsoned. "Plague on't! They are sour, Master Hart." With a glance of contempt, he turned on his heel and left the room.

A triumphant smile played upon the manager's face. He felt that he had annoyed his lordship without his intention being apparent. "A good exit, on my honour," he muttered, as he stood contemplating the door through which Buckingham had passed; "but, by Heaven, he shall better it unless he takes his eyes from Nell. Great men believe themselves resistless with the fair; more often, the fair are resistless with great men."

He took a final look at himself in the

glass, adjusted his scimiter; and, well satisfied with himself and the conceit of his epigram unheard save by himself, he also departed, to take up his cue.

CHAPTER III

He took them from Castlemaine's hand to throw to you.

THE greenroom seemed like some old forest rent by a storm. Its furniture, which was none too regular at best, either in carving or arrangement, had the irregularity which comes only with a tempest, human or divine. The table, it is true, still stood on its four oaken legs; but even it was well awry. The chairs were scattered here and there, some resting upon their backs. To add to all this, oranges in confusion were strewn broadcast upon the floor.

A storm in fact had visited the greenroom. The storm was Nell.

In the midst of the confusion, a jolly old face peeped cautiously in at the door which led to the street. At the sound of Manager Hart's thunderous tones coming from the stage, however, it as promptly disappeared, only to return when the ap-

parent danger ceased. It was a rare old figure and a rare old dress and a rare old man. Yet, not an old man either. His face was red; for he was a tavern spirit, well known and well beloved, — a lover of good ale! Across his back hung a fiddle which too had the appearance of being the worse for wear, if fiddles can ever be said to be the worse for wear.

The intruder took off his dilapidated hat, hugged his fiddle closely under his arm and looked about the room, more cautiously than respectfully.

"Oons, here is a scattering of props; a warfare of the orange-wenches!" he exclaimed. "A wise head comes into battle after the last shot is fired."

He proceeded forthwith to fill his pockets, of which there seemed to be an abundance of infinite depth, with oranges. This done, he calmly made a hole in the next orange which came to his hand and began to suck it loudly and persistently, boy-fashion, meanwhile smacking his lips. His face was one wreath of unctuous smiles. "There is but one way to eat an

orange," he chuckled; "that's through a hole."

At this moment, Hart's voice was heard again upon the stage, and the new-comer to the greenroom liked to have dropped his orange. "Odsbud, that's one of Master Hart's love-tones," he thought. "I must see Nell before he sees me, or it will be farewell Strings." He hastened to Nell's tiring-room and rapped lightly on the door. "Mistress Nell! Mistress Nell!" he called.

The door opened, but it was not Nell. Her maid pointed toward the stage. Strings — for Strings was his name, or at least none knew him by a better — accordingly hobbled across the room — for the wars too had left their mark on him — and peeped off in the direction indicated.

"Gad," he exclaimed, gleefully clapping his hands, "there she goes on the stage as a Moorish princess."

There was a storm of applause without.

"Bravo, Nelly, bravo!" he continued. "She's caught the lads in the pit. They

worship Nell out there." The old fellow straightened up as if he felt a personal pride in the audience for evincing such good taste.

"Oons! Jack Hart struts about like a young game-cock at his first fight," he observed. He broke into an infectious laugh, which would have been a fine basso for Nell's laugh.

From the manager, his eye turned toward the place which he himself had once occupied among the musicians. He began to dance up and down with both feet, his knees well bent, boy-fashion, and to clap his hands wildly. "Look ye, little Tompkins got my old place with the fiddle. Whack, de-doodle-de-do! Whack, de-doodle, de-doodle-de-do!" he cried, giving grotesque imitations to his own great glee of his successor as leader of the orchestra.

Then, shaking his head, confident of his own superiority with the bow, he turned back into the greenroom and, with his mouth half full of orange, uttered the droll dictum: "It will take more than cat-

gut and horse-hair to make you a fiddler, Tommy, my boy."

Thus Strings stood blandly sucking his orange with personal satisfaction in the centre of the room, when Dick entered from the stage. The call-boy paused as if he could not believe his eyes. He looked and looked again.

"Heigh-ho!" he exclaimed at last, and then rushed across the room to greet the old fiddler. "Why, Strings, I thought we would never see you again; how fares it with you?"

Strings placed the orange which he had been eating and which he knew full well was none of his own well behind him; and, assuming an unconcerned and serious air, he replied: "Odd! A little the worse for wear, Dickey, me and the old fiddle, but still smiling with the world." There was a bit of a twinkle in his eye as he spoke.

Dick, ever mindful of the welfare and appearance of the theatre, unhooked from the wall a huge shield, which mayhap had served some favourite knight of yore,

and, using it as a tray, proceeded to gather the scattered fruit.

"Have an orange?" he inquired of Strings, who still stood in a reflective mood in the centre of the room, as he rested in his labours by him.

"How; do they belong to you?" demanded Strings.

"Oh, no," admitted Dick, "but—"

The fiddler instantly assumed an air of injured innocence.

"How dare you," he cried, "offer me what don't belong to you?" He turned upon the boy almost ferociously at the bare thought. "Honesty is the best policy," he continued, seriously. "I have tried both, lad"; and, in his eagerness to impress upon the boy the seriousness of taking that which does not belong to you, he gestured inadvertently with the hand which till now had held the stolen orange well behind him.

Dick's eye fell upon it, and so did Strings's. There was a moment's awkwardness, and then both burst into a peal of joyous laughter.

"Oh, well, egad,—I *will* join you, Dick," said Strings, with more patronage still than apology. He seated himself upon the table and began anew to suck his orange in philosophic fashion.

"But, mind you, lad; never again offer that which is not your own, for there you are twice cursed," he discoursed pompously. "You make him who receives guilty of your larceny. Oons, my old wound." He winced from pain. "He becomes an accomplice in your crime. So says the King's law. Hush, lad, I am devouring the evidence of your guilt."

The boy by this time had placed the shield of oranges in the corner of the room and had returned to listen to Strings's discourse. "You speak with the learning of a solicitor," he said, as he looked respectfully into the old fiddler's face.

Strings met the glance with due dignity.

"Marry, I've often been in the presence of a judge," he replied, with great solemnity. His face reflected the ups and

downs in his career as he made the confession.

"Is that where you have been, Strings, all these long days?" asked Dick, innocently.

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Strings, with sadly retrospective countenance. "Travelling, lad—contemplating the world, from the King's highways. Take note, my boy,—a prosperous man! I came into the world without a rag that I could call my own, and now I have an abundance. Saith the philosopher: Some men are born to rags, some achieve rags and some have rags thrust upon them."

"I wish you were back with us, Strings," said the boy, sympathetically, as he put a hand upon Strings's broad shoulder and looked admiringly up into his face.

"I wish so myself," replied the fiddler. "Thrice a day, I grow lonesome here." A weather-beaten hand indicated the spot where good dinners should be.

"They haven't all forgot you, Strings," continued his companion, consolingly.

"Right, lad!" said Strings, musingly, as he lifted the old viol close against his cheek and tenderly picked it. "The old fiddle is true to me yet, though there is but one string left to its dear old neck." There was a sob in his voice as he spoke. "I tell you, a fiddle's human, Dick! It laughs at my jokes alone now; it weeps at my sorrows." He sighed deeply and the tears glistened in his eyes. "The fiddle is the only friend left me and the little ones at home now, my lad."

"—And Dick!" the boy suggested, somewhat hurt. He too was weeping. "It's a shame; that's what it is!" he broke out, indignantly. "Tompkins can't play the music like you used to, Strings."

"Oons!" exclaimed the fiddler, the humour in his nature bubbling again to the surface. "It's only now and then the Lord has time to make a fiddler, Dickey, my boy."

As he spoke, the greenroom shook with the rounds of applause from the pit and galleries without.

"Hurrah!" he shouted, following

Dick to the stage-door — his own sorrows melting before the sunshine of his joy at the success of his favourite. "Nell has caught them with the epilogue." He danced gleefully about, entering heartily into the applause and totally forgetful of the fact that he was on dangerous ground.

Dick was more watchful. "Manager Hart's coming!" he exclaimed in startled voice, fearful for the welfare of his friend.

Strings collapsed. "Oh, Lord, let me be gone," he said, as he remembered the bitter quarrel he had had with the manager of the King's House, which ended in the employment of Tompkins. He did not yearn for another interview; for Hart had forbidden him the theatre on pain of whipping.

"Where can you hide?" whispered Dick, woefully, as the manager's voice indicated that he was approaching the greenroom, and that too in far from the best of humour.

"Behind Richard's throne-chair! It has held sinners before now," added the fiddler as he glided well out of sight.

Dick was more cautious. In a twinkling, he was out of the door which led to the street.

The greenroom walls looked grim in the sputtering candle-light, but they had naught to say.

The door from the stage opened, and in came Nell. There was something sadly beautiful and pathetic in her face. She had enjoyed but now one of the grandest triumphs known to the theatre, and yet she seemed oblivious to the applause and bravas, to the lights and to the royalty.

A large bouquet of flowers was in her arms—a bouquet of red roses. Her lips touched them reverently. Her eyes, however, were far away in a dream of the past.

"From the hand of the King of England!" she mused softly to herself. "The King? How like his face to the youthful cavalier, who weary and worn reined in his steed a summer's day, now long ago, and took a gourd of water from my hand. Could he have been the King? Pooh, pooh! I dream again."

She turned away, as from herself, with a heart-heavy laugh. The manager entered from the stage.

"See, Jack, my flowers," she said, again in an ecstasy of happiness. "Are they not exquisite?"

"He took them from Castlemaine's hand to throw to you," snarled Hart, jealously.

"The sweeter, then!" and Nell broke into a tantalizing laugh. "Mayhap he was teaching the player-king to do likewise, Jack," she added, roguishly, as she arranged the flowers in a vase.

"I am in no mood for wit-thrusts," replied Hart as he fretfully paced the room. "You played that scene like an icicle."

"In sooth, your acting froze me," slyly retorted Nell, kindly but pointedly. She took the sweetest roses from the bunch, kissed them and arranged them in her bosom.

This did not improve Hart's temper.

Strings seized the opportunity to escape from his hiding-place to the stage.

"I say, you completely ruined my work," said Hart. "The audience were rightly displeased."

"With you, perhaps," suggested Nell. "I did not observe the feeling."

Hart could no longer control himself. "You vilely read those glorious lines:

"*See how the gazing People crowd the Place;*
All gaping to be fill'd with my Disgrace.
That Shout, like the hoarse Peals of Vultures rings,
When, over fighting Fields they beat their wings."

"And how should I read them, dear master?" she asked demurely of her vainglorious preceptor.

"Like I read them, in sooth," replied he, well convinced that his reading could not be bettered.

"Like you read them, in sooth," replied Nell, meekly. She took the floor and repeated the lines with the precise action and trick of voice which Hart had used. Every "r" was well trilled; "gaping" was pronounced with an anaconda-

look, as though she were about to swallow the theatre, audience and all; and, as she spoke the line, "When, over fighting Fields they beat their wings," she raised her arms and shoulders in imitation of some barn-yard fowl vainly essaying flight and swept across the room, the picture of grace in ungracefulness.

"'T is monstrous!" exclaimed Hart, bitterly, as he realized the travesty. "You cannot act and never could. I was a fool to engage you."

Nell was back by the vase, toying with the flowers. "London applauds my acting," she suggested, indifferently.

"London applauds the face and figure; not the art," replied Hart.

"London is wise; for the art is in the face and figure, Master Jack. You told me so yourself," she added, sharply, pointing her finger at her adversary in quick condemnation. She turned away triumphant.

"I was a fool like the rest," replied Hart, visibly irritated that he could not get the better of the argument.

"Come, don't be angry," said Nell. Her manner had changed; for her heart had made her fearful lest her tongue had been unkind. "Mayhap Almahyde is the last part Nell will ever play." She looked thoughtfully into the bunch of roses. Did she see a prophecy there?

He approached the table where she stood. "Your head is turned by the flowers," he said, bitterly. "An honest motive, no doubt, prompted the royal gift."

Nell turned sharply upon him. Her lips trembled, but one word only came to them—"Jack!"

Hart's eyes fell under the rebuke; for he knew that only anger prompted what he had said. He would have struck another for the same words.

"Pardon, Nell," he said, softly. "My heart rebukes my tongue. I love you!"

Nell stepped back to the mirror, contemplating herself, bedecked as she was with the flowers. In an instant she forgot all, and replied playfully to Hart's confession of love: "Of course, you do. How could you help it? So do others."

"I love you better than the rest," he added, vehemently, "better than my life." He tried to put his arms about her.

Nell, however, was by him like a flash.

"Not so fast, dear sir," she said, coyly; and she tiptoed across the room and ensconced herself high in the throne-chair.

Hart followed and knelt below her, adoring.

"Admit that I can act—a little—just a little—dear Hart, or tell me no more of love." She spoke with the half-amused, half-indifferent air of a beautiful princess to some servant-suitor; and she was, indeed, most lovable as she leaned back in the great throne-chair. She seemed a queen and the theatre her realm. Her beautiful arms shone white in the flickering candle-light. Her sceptre was a rose which the King of England had given her.

Hart stepped back and looked upon the picture. "By heaven, Nell," he cried, "I spoke in anger. You are the most marvellous actress in the world. Nature, art and genius crown your work."

Nell smiled at his vehemence. "I begin

to think that you have taste most excellent," she said.

Hart sprang to her side, filled with hope. As the stage-lover he ne'er spoke in tenderer tones. "Sweet Nell, when I found you in the pit, a ragged orange-girl, I saw the sparkle in your eye, the bright intelligence, the magic genius, which artists love. I claimed you for my art, which is the art of arts—for it embraces all. I had the theatre. I gave it you. You captured the Lane—then London. You captured my soul as well, and held it slave."

"Did I do all that, dear Jack?" she asked, wistfully.

"And more," said Hart, rapturously. "You captured my years to come, my hope, ambition, love—all. All centred in your heart and eyes, sweet Nell, from the hour I first beheld you."

Nell's look was far away. "Is love so beautiful?" she murmured softly. Her eye fell upon her sceptre-rose. "Yea, I begin to think it is." She mused a moment, until the silence seemed to awaken her. She looked into Hart's eyes again,

sadly but firmly, then spoke as with an effort: "You paint the picture well, dear Jack. Paint on." Her hand waved commandingly.

"I could not paint ill with such a model," said he, his voice full of adoration.

"Well said," she replied; "and by my troth, I have relented like you, dear Jack. I admit you too can act—and marvellously well." She took his trembling hand and descended from the throne. He tried once again to embrace her, but she avoided him as before.

"Is 't true?" he asked, eagerly, without observing the hidden meaning in her voice.

"'T is true, indeed—with proper emphasis and proper art and proper intonation." She crossed the room, Hart following her.

"I scarce can live for joy," he breathed.

Nell leaned back upon the table and looked knowingly and deeply into Hart's eyes. Her voice grew very low, but clear and full of meaning.

"In faith," she said, "I trow and sadly

speak but true; for I am sad at times—yea—very sad—when I observe, with all my woman's wiles and arts, I cannot act the hypocrite like men."

"What mean you, darling cynic?" asked he, jocosely.

"Darling!" she cried, repeating the word, with a peculiar look. "To tell two girls within the hour you love each to the death would be in me hypocrisy, I admit, beyond my art; but you men can do such things with conscience clear."

Hart turned away his face. "She's found me out," he thought.

"Nell, I never loved the Spanish dancing-girl. You know I love but you."

"Oh, ho!" laughed Nell. "Then why did you tell her so?—to break her heart or mine?"

The manager stood confused. He scarce knew what to say.

"You are cruel, Nell," he pleaded, fretfully. "You never loved me, never."

"Did I ever say I did?"

Hart shook his head sadly.

"Come, don't pout, Jack. An armistice

in this, my friend, for you were my friend in the old days when I needed one, and I love you for that." She placed her hands kindly on the manager's shoulders, then turned and began to arrange anew the gift-flowers in the vase.

"I'll win your life's love, Nell, in spite of you," he said, determinedly.

She turned her honest eyes upon him. "Nay, do not try; believe me, do not try," she said softly.

"Nell, you do not mean—?" His voice faltered.

"You must not love me," she said, firmly; "believe me, you must not."

"I must not love you!" His voice scarcely breathed the words.

"There, there; we are growing sentimental, Jack,—and at our age," she replied. She laughed gaily and started for her tiring-room.

He followed her.

"Sup with me, Nell," he pleaded. "No word of this, I promise you."

"Heyday, I'll see how good you are, Jack," she answered, cordially.

"My second bid to sup to-night," she thought. "Who sets the better feast?"

The tiring-room door was open; and the little candles danced gleefully about the make-up mirror, for even candles seemed happy when Nell came near. The maid stood ready to assist her to a gown and wrap, that she might leave the theatre.

Nell turned. Hart still stood waiting. The spirit of kindness o'er-mastered her.

"Your hand, friend, your hand," she said, taking the manager's hand. "When next you try to win a woman's love, don't throw away her confidence; for you will never get it back again entire."

Hart bowed his head under the rebuke; and she entered her room.

CHAPTER IV

Flowers and Music feed naught but Love.

THE manager stood a moment looking through the half-closed door at Nell. There was a strange mingling of contending forces at work in his nature. To be sure, he had trifled with the affections of the Spanish dancing-girl, a new arrival from Madrid and one of the latest attractions of the King's House; but it was his pride, when he discovered that Nell's sharp eyes had found him out, that suffered, not his conscience. Was he not the fascinating actor-manager of the House? Could he prevent the ladies loving him? Must he be accused of not loving Nell, simply because his charms had edified the shapely new-comer? Nell's rebuke had depressed him, but there was a smouldering fire within. "'Slife!" he muttered. "If I do not steal my way into Nell's heart, I'll abandon the rouge-box and till the soil."

As he approached his tiring-room, he bethought him that it would be well first to have an oversight of the theatre. He turned accordingly and pulled open the door that led to the stage.

As he did so, a figure fell into the greenroom, grasping devotedly a violin, lest his fall might injure it. Strings had been biding his time, waiting an opportunity to see Nell, and had fallen asleep behind the door.

"How now, dog!" exclaimed the manager when he saw who the intruder was.

Strings hastened to his feet and hobbled across the room.

"I told you not to set foot here again," shouted Hart, following him virulently.

Strings bowed meekly. "I thought the King's House in need of a player; so I came back, sir," said he.

Hart was instantly beside himself. "Zounds!" he stormed. "I have had enough impudence to contend with to-night. Begone; or up you go for a vagrant."

"I called on Mistress Gwyn, sir," explained Strings.

"Mistress Gwyn does not receive drunkards," fiercely retorted Hart; and he started hastily to the stage-door and called loudly for his force of men to put the fiddler out.

Nell's door was still ajar. She had removed the roses from her hair and dress. She caught at once her name. Indeed, there was little that went on which Nell did not see or hear, even though walls intervened. "Who takes my name in vain?" she called. Her head popped through the opening left by the door, and she scanned the room.

As her eye fell upon the old fiddler, who had often played songs and dances for her in days gone by, a cry of joy came from her lips. She rushed into the green-room and threw both arms about Strings's neck. "My old comrade, as I live," she cried, dancing about him. "I am joyed to see you, Strings!"

Turning, she saw the manager eying them with fiery glances. She knew the

situation and the feeling. "Jack, is it not good to have Strings back?" she asked, sweetly.

Hart's face grew livid with anger. He could see the merry devil dancing in her eye and on her tongue. He knew the hoyden well. "Gad, I will resign management." He turned on his heel, entered his tiring-room and closed the door, none too gently. He feared to tarry longer, lest he might say too much.

Nell broke into a merry laugh; and the fiddler chuckled.

"You desert me these days, Strings," she said, as she leaned against the table and fondly eyed the wayfarer of the tattered garments and convivial spirits.

"I don't love your lackey-in-waiting, Mistress Nell," said he, with a wink in the direction of the departed manager.

"Poor Jack. Never mind him," she said, with a roguish laugh, though with no touch of malice in it, for there was devil without malice in Nell's soul.

As she again sought the eyes of the fiddler, her face grew thoughtful. She

spoke—hesitated—and then spoke again, as if the thought gave her pain. "Have you kept your word to me, Strings, and stopped—drinking?" she asked. The last word fell faintly, tremblingly, from her lips—almost inaudibly.

"Mistress Nell, I—I—" Strings's eyes fell quickly.

Nell's arm was lovingly about him in an instant. "There, there; don't tell me, Strings. Try again, and come and see me often." There was a delicacy in her voice and way more beautiful than the finest acting. The words had hurt her more than him. She changed her manner in an instant.

Not so with Strings. The tears were in his eyes. "Mistress Nell, you are so good to me," he said; "and I am such a wretch."

"So you are, Strings," and she laughed merrily.

"I have taught my little ones at home who it is that keeps the wolf from our door," he continued.

"Not a word of that!" she exclaimed,

reprovingly. "Poor old fellow!" Her eyes grew big and bright as she reflected on the days she had visited the fiddler's home and on the happiness her gifts had brought his children. For her, giving was better than receiving. The feeling sprang from the fulness of her own joy at seeing those about her happy, and not from the teachings of priests or prelates. Dame Nature was her sole preceptor in this.

"I'll bring the babes another sugar plum to-morrow. I haven't a farthing to-night. Moll ran away with the earnings, and there is no one left to rob," she said.

"Heyday," and she ran lightly to the vase and caught up the flowers. "Take the flowers to the bright eyes, to make them brighter." They would at least add cheerfulness to the room where Strings lived until she could bring something better.

As she looked at the roses, she began to realize how dear they were becoming to herself, for they were the King's gift; and her heart beat quickly and she touched the great red petals lovingly with her lips.

Strings took the flowers awkwardly; and, as he did so, something fell upon the floor. He knelt and picked it up, in his eagerness letting the roses fall.

"A ring among the flowers, Mistress Nell," he cried.

"A ring!" she exclaimed, taking the jewel quickly. Her lips pressed the setting. "Bless his heart! A ring from his finger," she continued half aloud. "Is it not handsome, Strings?" Her eyes sparkled brightly and there was a triumphant smile upon her lips.

The fiddler's face, however, was grave; his eyes were on the floor.

"How many have rings like that, while others starve," he mused, seriously.

Nell held the jewel at arm's length and watched its varying brightness in the candle-light. "We can moralize, now we have the ring," she said, by way of rejoinder, then broke into a ringing laugh at her own way-of-the-world philosophizing. "Bless the giver!" she added, in a mood of rhapsody.

She turned, only again to observe the

sad countenance of Strings. "Alack-a-day! Why do you not take the nosegay?" she asked, wonderingly; for she herself was so very happy that she could not see why Strings too should not be so.

"It will not feed my little ones, Mistress Nell," he answered, sadly.

Nell's heart was touched in an instant. "Too true!" she said, sympathetically, falling on her knee and lovingly gathering up the roses. "Flowers and Music feed naught but Love, and often then Love goes hungry—very hungry." Her voice was so sweet and tender that it seemed as though the old viol had caught the notes.

"Last night, Mistress Nell," said Strings, "the old fiddle played its sweetest melody for them, but they cried as if their tiny hearts would break. They were starving, and I had nothing but music for them."

"Starving!" Nell listened to the word as though at first she did not realize its meaning. "What can I send?" she cried, looking about in vain and into her tiring-room.

Her eyes fell suddenly upon the rich jewel upon her finger. "No, no; I cannot think of that," she thought.

Then the word "starving" came back to her again with all its force. "Starving!" Her imagination pictured all its horrors. "Starving" seemed written on every wall and on the ceiling. It pierced her heart and brain. "Yes, I will," she exclaimed, wildly. "Here, Strings, old fellow, take the ring to the babes, to cut their teeth on."

Strings stood aghast. "No, Mistress Nell; it is a present. You must not," he protested.

"There are others where that came from," generously laughed Nell.

"You must not; you are too kind," he continued, firmly.

"Pooh, pooh! I insist," said Nell as she forced the jewel upon him. "It will make a pretty mouthful; and, besides, I do not want my jewels to outshine me."

Strings would have followed her and insisted upon her taking back the beau-

tiful gift, but Nell was gone in an instant and her door closed.

"To cut their teeth on!" he repeated as he placed the jewelled ring wonderingly upon his bow-finger and watched it sparkle and laugh in the light as he pretended to play a tune. "She is always joking like that; Heaven reward her."

He stood lost in the realization of sudden affluence.

Buckingham entered the room from the stage-door. His eyes were full of excitement. "The audience are wild over Nell, simply wild," he exclaimed in his enthusiasm, unconscious of the fact that he had an auditor, who was equally oblivious of his lordship's presence. "Gad," he continued, rapturously, half aloud, half to himself, "when they are stumbling home through London fog, the great *comédienne* will be playing o'er the love-scenes with Buckingham in a cosy corner of an inn. She will not dare deny my bid to supper, with all her impudence. *Un petit souper!*" He broke into a laugh. "'Tis well Old Rowley was too en-

gaged to look twice at Nelly's eyes," he thought. "His Majesty shall never meet the wench at arm's length, an I can help it."

He observed or rather became aware for the first time that there was another occupant of the room.

"Ah, sirrah," he called, without noting the character of his companion, "inform Mistress Nell, Buckingham is waiting."

Strings looked up. He seemed to have grown a foot in contemplation of his sudden wealth. Indeed, each particular tatter on his back seemed to have assumed an independent air.

"Inform her yourself!" he declared; and his manner might well have become the dress of Buckingham. "Lord Strings is not your lackey this season."

Buckingham gazed at him in astonishment, followed by amusement. "Lord Strings!" he observed. "Lord Rags!"

Strings approached his lordship with a familiar, princely air. "How does that look on my bow-finger, my lord?" and he

flourished his hand wearing the ring where Buckingham could well observe it.

His lordship started. "The King's ring!" he would have exclaimed, had not the diplomat in his nature restrained him. "A fine stone!" he said merely. "How came you by it?"

"Nell gave it to me," Strings answered.

Buckingham nearly revealed himself in his astonishment. "Nell!" he muttered; and his face grew black as he wondered if his Majesty had out-generalled him. "Damme," he observed aloud, inspecting the ring closely, "I have taken a fancy to this gem."

"So have I," ejaculated Strings, as he avoided his lordship and strutted across the room.

"I'll give you fifty guineas for it," said Buckingham, following him more eagerly than the driver of a good bargain is wont.

Strings stood nonplussed. "Fifty guineas!" he exclaimed, aghast. This was more money than the fiddler had ever thought existed. "Now?" he asked, wonderingly.

"Now," replied his lordship, who proceeded at once to produce the glittering coins and toss them temptingly before the fiddler's eyes.

"Oons, Nell surely meant me to sell it," he cried as he eagerly seized the gold and fed his eyes upon it. "Odsbud, I always did love yellow." He tossed some of the coins in the air and caught them with the dexterity of a juggler.

Buckingham grew impatient. He desired a delivery. "Give me the ring," he demanded.

Strings looked once more at the glittering gold; and visions of the plenty which it insured to his little home, to say nothing of a flagon or two of good brown ale which could be had by himself and his boon comrades without disparagement to the dinners of the little ones, came before him. If he had ever possessed moral courage, it was gone upon the instant. "Done!" he exclaimed. "Oons, fifty guineas!" and he handed the ring to Buckingham.

The fiddler was still absorbed in his possessions, whispering again and again

to the round bits of yellow: "My little bright-eyes will not go to bed hungry to-night!" when Manager Hart entered proudly from his tiring-room, dressed to leave the theatre.

Buckingham nodded significantly. "Not a word of this," he said, indicating the ring, which he had quickly transferred to his own finger, turning the jewel so that it could not be observed.

"'Sdeath, you still here?" said Hart, sharply, as his eyes fell upon the fiddler.

Strings straightened up and puffed with the pomposity and pride of a landed proprietor. He shook his newly acquired possessions until the clinking of the gold was plainly audible to the manager.

"Still here, Master Hart, negotiating. When you are pressed for coin, call on me, Master Hart. I run the Exchequer," he said, patronizingly. It was humorous to see his air of sweeping condescension toward the tall and dignified manager of the theatre who easily overtopped him by a head.

"Gold!" exclaimed Hart, as he ob-

served the glitter of the guineas in the candle-light. His eyes turned quickly and suspiciously upon the lordly Buckingham.

There was nothing, however, in his lordship's face to indicate that he was aware even of the existence of the fiddler or of his gold. He sat by the table, leaning carelessly upon it, his face filled with an expression of supreme satisfaction. He had the attitude of one who was waiting for somebody or something and confidently expected not to be disappointed.

"Sup with me, Hart," continued Strings, with the air of a boon comrade. "Sup with me — venison, capons, and — Epsom water."

"Thank you, I am engaged to supper," replied Hart, contemptuously, brushing his cloak where it had been touched by the fiddler, as if his fingers had contaminated it.

The insult clearly observable in the manager's tone, however, had no effect whatever upon Strings. He tossed his head proudly and said indifferently: "Oh, very well. Strings will sup with Strings. My

coach, my coach, I say. Drive me to my bonnie babes!"

He pushed open the door with a lordly air and passed out; and, for some seconds, they heard a mingling of repeated demands for the coach and a strain of music which sounded like "Away dull care; prythee away from me."

Buckingham had observed the fiddler's tilt with the manager and the royal exit of the ragged fellow with much amusement. "A merry wag! Who is that?" he asked, as Strings's voice grew faint in the entry-way.

Hart was strutting actor-fashion before the mirror, arranging his curls to hang gracefully over his forehead and tilting now and again the big plumed hat. "A knave of fortune, it seems," he answered coolly and still suspiciously.

"Family?" asked Buckingham, indifferently.

"Twins, I warrant," replied Hart, in an irritated tone.

Buckingham chuckled softly.

"No wonder he's tattered and gray,"

he declared, humorously philosophizing upon Hart's reply, though it was evident that Hart himself was too much chafed by the presence of his lordship in the greenroom after the play to know what he really had said.

An ominous coolness now pervaded the atmosphere. Buckingham sat by the table, impatiently tapping the floor with his boot, his eyes growing dark at the delay. Hart still plumed himself before the mirror. His dress was rich; his sword was well balanced, a Damascus blade; his cloak hung gracefully; his big black hat and plumes were jaunty. He had, too, vigour in his step. With it all, however, he was a social outcast, and he felt it, while his companion, whose faults of nature were none the less glaring than his own, was almost the equal of a king.

There was a tap at Nell's door. It was the call-boy, who had slipped unobserved into the room.

"What is it, Dick?" asked Nell, sweetly, as she opened the door slightly to inspect her visitor.

"A message,—very important," whispered Dick, softly, as he passed a note within.

"Thank you," replied the actress; and the door closed again.

Dick was about to depart, when the alert Buckingham, rising hastily from his seat, called him.

"That was Nell's voice?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord. She 's dressing," answered Dick. "Good night, Master Hart," he added, as he saw the manager.

Hart, however, was not in a good humour and turned sharply upon him. Dick vanished.

"She will be out shortly, my lord," the manager observed to Buckingham, somewhat coldly. "But it will do you little good," he thought, as he reflected upon his conversation with Nell.

Buckingham leaned lazily over the back of a chair and replied confidently, knowing that his speech would be no balm to the irate manager: "Nell always keeps her engagements religiously with

me. We are to sup together to-night, Hart."

"Odso!" retorted the other, drawing himself up to his full height. "You will be disappointed, methinks."

"I trow not," Buckingham observed, with a smile which made Hart wince. "Pepys's wife has him mewed up at home when Nelly plays, and the King is tied to other apron-strings." His lordship chuckled as he bethought him how cleverly he had managed that his Majesty be under the proper influence. "What danger else?" he inquired, cuttingly.

Though the words were mild, the feelings of the two men were at white-heat.

"Your lordship's hours are too valuable to waste," politely suggested the manager. "I happen to know Mistress Gwyn sups with another to-night."

"Another?" sneered his lordship.

"Another!" hotly repeated the actor.

"We shall see, friend Hart," said Buckingham, in a tone no less agreeable, with difficulty restraining his feelings.

He threw himself impatiently into a

big arm-chair, which he had swung around angrily, so that its back was to the manager.

The insult was more than Hart could bear. He also seized a chair, and vented his vengeance upon it. Almost hurled from its place, it fell back to back with Buckingham's.

"We shall see, my lord," he said as he likewise angrily took his seat and folded his arms.

It was like "The Schism" of Vibert.

It is difficult to tell what would have been the result, had the place been different. Each knew that Nell was just beyond her door; each hesitated; and each, with bitterness in his heart, held on to himself. They sat like sphinxes.

Suddenly, Nell's door slightly opened. She was dressed to leave the theatre. In her hand she held a note.

"A fair message, on my honour! Worth reading twice or even thrice," she roguishly exclaimed unto her maid as she directed her to hold a candle nearer that she might once again spell out its

words. "'To England's idol, the divine Eleanor Gwyn.' A holy apt beginning, by the mass! 'My coach awaits you at the stage-door. We will toast you to-night at Whitehall.'"

Nell's eyes seemed to drink in the words, and it was her heart which said: "Long live his Majesty."

She took the King's roses in her arms; the Duke's roses, she tossed upon the floor.

The manager awoke as from a trance. "You will not believe me," he said to Buckingham, confidently. "Here comes the arbiter of your woes, my lord." He arose quickly.

"It will not be hard, methinks, sir, to decide between a coronet and a player's tinsel crown," observed his princely rival, with a sneer, as he too arose and assumed an attitude of waiting.

"Have a care, my lord. I may forget—" Hart's fingers played upon his sword-hilt.

"Your occupation, sir?" jeered Buckingham.

"Aye; my former occupation of a soldier"; and Hart's sword sprang from its

scabbard, with a dexterity that proved that he had not forgotten the trick of war.

Buckingham too would have drawn, but a merry voice stayed him.

"How now, gentlemen?" sprang from Nell's rosy lips, as she came between them, a picture of roguish beauty.

Hart's pose in an instant was that of apology. "Pardon, Nell," he exclaimed, lifting his hat and bowing in courtly fashion. "A small difference of opinion; naught else."

"Between friends," replied Nell, reprovingly.

"By the Gods," cried Buckingham,— and his hat too was in the air and his knee too was bent before the theatre-queen,—"the rewards are worth more than word-combats."

"Pshaw!" said Nell, as she hugged the King's roses tighter in her arms. "True Englishmen fight shoulder to shoulder, not face to face."

"In this case," replied his lordship, with the air of a conqueror, "the booty cannot be amicably distributed."

"Oh, ho!" cried Nell. "Brave generals, quarrelling over the spoils. Pooh! There is no girl worth fighting for — that is, not over one! Buckingham! Jack! For shame! What coquette kindles this hot blood?"

"The fairest maid in England," said Hart, with all the earnestness of conviction, and with all the courtesy of the theatre, which teaches courtesy.

"The dearest girl in all this world," said Buckingham as quickly; for he too must bow if he would win.

"How stupid!" lisped Nell, with a look of baby-innocence. "You must mean me! Who else could answer the description? A quarrel over poor me! This is delicious. I love a fight. Out with your swords and to't like men! To the victor! Come, name the quarrel."

"This player —" began his lordship, hotly. He caught the quick gleam in Nell's eyes and hesitated. "I mean," he substituted, apologetically, "Master Hart — labours under the misapprehension that you sup with him to-night."

"Nell," asserted the manager, defen-

sively, "it is his lordship who suffers from the delusion that the first actress of England sups with him to-night."

"My arm and coach are yours, madame," pleaded his lordship, as he gallantly offered an arm.

"Pardon, my lord; Nell, my arm!" said Hart.

"Heyday!" cried the witch, bewitchingly. "Was ever maid so nobly squired? This is an embarrassment of riches." She looked longingly at the two attending gallants. There was something in her voice that might be mockery or that might be love. Only the devil in her eyes could tell.

"Gentlemen, you tear my heart-strings," she continued. "How can I choose between such loves? To-night, I sup at Whitehall!" and she darted quickly toward the door.

"Whitehall!" the rivals cried, aghast.

"Aye, Whitehall—*with the King!*"

There was a wild, hilarious laugh, and she was gone.

Buckingham and Hart stood looking

into each other's face. They heard the sound of coach-wheels rapidly departing in the street.

CHAPTER V

It was never treason to steal a King's kisses.

A YEAR and more had flown.

It was one of those glorious moon-lit nights in the early fall when there is a crispness in the air which lends an edge to life.

St. James's Park was particularly beautiful. The giant oaks with their hundreds of years of story written in their rings lifted high their spreading branches, laden with leaves, which shimmered in the light. The historic old park seemed to be made up of patches of day and night. In the open, one might read in the mellow glow of the harvest-moon; in the shade of one of its oaks, a thief might safely hide.

Facing on the park, there stood a house of Elizabethan architecture. Along its wrinkled, ivy-mantled wall ran a terrace-like balustrade, where one might walk and enjoy the night without fear.

The house was well defined by the rays of the moon, which seemed to dance upon it in a halo of mirth; and from the park, below the terrace, came the soft notes of a violin, tenderly picked.

None other than Strings was sitting astride of a low branch of an oak, looking up at a window, like some guardian spirit from the devil-land, singing in his quaintly unctuous way:

"*Four and twenty fiddlers all in a row,*
And there was fiddle-fiddle, and twice fiddle-fiddle."

"How's that for a serenade to Mistress Nell?" he asked himself as he secured a firm footing on the ground and slung his fiddle over his back. "She don't know it's for her, but the old viol and old Strings know." He came to a stand-still and winced. "Oons, my old wound again," he said, with a sharp cry, followed as quickly by a laugh. His eyes still wandered along the balustrade, as eagerly as some young Romeo at the balcony of his Juliet. "I wish she'd walk her terrace to-

night," he sighed, "where we could see her—the lovely lady!"

His rhapsody was suddenly broken in upon by the approach of some one down the path. He glided into the shadow of an oak and none too quickly.

From the obscurity of the trees, into the open, a chair was swiftly borne, by the side of which ran a pretty page of tender years, yet well schooled in courtly wisdom. The lovely occupant leaned forward and motioned to the chairmen, who obediently rested and assisted her to alight.

"Retire beneath the shadow of the trees," she whispered. "Have a care; no noise."

The chairmen withdrew quietly, but within convenient distance, to await her bidding.

Strings's heart quite stopped beating. "The Duchess of Portsmouth at Mistress Nell's!" he said, almost aloud in his excitement. "Then the devil must be to pay!" and he slipped well behind the oak-trunk again.

Portsmouth's eyes snapped with French

fire as she glanced up at Nell's terrace. Then she turned to the page by her side. "His Majesty came this path before?" she asked, with quick, French accent.

"Yes, your grace," replied the page.

"And up this trellis?"

"Yes, your grace."

"Again to-night?"

"I cannot tell, your grace," replied the lad. "I followed as you bade me; but the King's legs were so long, you see, I lost him."

Portsmouth smiled. "Softly, pretty one," she said. "Watch if he comes and warn me; for we may have passed him."

The lad ran gaily down the path to perform her bidding.

"State-business!" she muttered, as she reflected bitterly upon the King's late excuses to her. "*Mon Dieu*, does he think me a country wench? I was schooled at Louis's court." Her eyes searched the house from various points of advantage. "A light!" she exclaimed, as a candle burned brightly from a window, like a spark of gold set in the silver of the night.

"Would I had an invisible cloak." She tiptoed about a corner of the wall—woman-like, to see if she could see, not Nell, but Charles.

Scarcely had she disappeared when a second figure started up in the moonlight, and a gallant figure, too. It was the Duke of Buckingham. "Not a mouse stirring," he reflected, glancing at the terrace. "Fair minx, you will not long refuse Buckingham's overtures. Come, Nelly, thy King is already half stolen away by Portsmouth of France, and Portsmouth of France is our dear ally in the great cause and shall be more so."

To his astonishment, as he drew nearer, he observed a lady, richly dressed, gliding between himself and the terrace. He rubbed his eyes to see that he was not dreaming. She was there, however, and a pretty armful, too.

"Nell," he chuckled, as he stole up behind her.

Portsmouth meanwhile had learned that the window was too high to allow her to gain a view within the dwelling.

She started—observing, more by intuition than by sight, that she was watched—and drew her veil closely about her handsome features.

"Nelly, Nelly," laughed Buckingham, "I have thee, wench. Come, a kiss!—a kiss! Nay, love; it was never treason to steal a King's kisses."

He seized her by the arm and was about to kiss her when she turned and threw back her veil.

"Buckingham!" she said, suavely.

"Portsmouth!" he exclaimed, awe-struck.

He gathered himself together, however, in an instant, and added, as if nothing in the world had happened: "An unexpected pleasure, your grace."

"Yes," said she, with a pretty shrug. "I did not know I was so honoured, my lord."

"Or you would not have refused the little kiss?" he asked, suggestively.

"You called me 'Nelly,' my lord. I do not respond to that name."

"Damme, I was never good at names,

Louise," said he, with mock-apology, "especially by moonlight."

"Buz, buz!" she answered, with a knowing gesture and a knowing look. Then, pointing toward the terrace, she added: "A pretty nest! A pretty bird within, I warrant. Her name?"

"Ignorance well feigned," he thought. He replied, however, most graciously: "Nell Gwyn."

"Oh, ho! The King's favourite, who has more power, they say, than great statesmen—like my lord."

Her speech was well defined to draw out his lordship; but he was wary.

"Unless my lord is guided by my lady, as formerly," he replied, diplomatically.

A look of suspicion crept into Portsmouth's face: but it was not visible for want of contrast; for all things have a perverted look by the light of the moon.

She had known Buckingham well at Dover. Their interests there had been one in securing privileges from England for her French King. Both had been well rewarded too for their pains. There were

no proofs, however, of this; and where his lordship stood to-day, and which cause he would espouse, she did not know. His eyes at Dover had fallen fondly upon her, but men's eyes fall fondly upon many women, and she would not trust too much until she knew more.

"My chairmen have set me down at the wrong door-step," she said, most sweetly. "My lord longs for his kiss. *Au revoir!*"

She bowed and turned to depart.

Buckingham was alert in an instant. He knew not when the opportunity might come again to deal so happily with Louis's emissary and the place and time of meeting had its advantages.

"Prythee stay, Duchess. I left the merry hunters, returning from Hounslow Heath, all in Portsmouth's interest," he said. "Is this to be my thanks?"

She approached him earnestly. "My lord must explain. I am stupid in fitting English facts to English words."

"Have you forgotten Dover?" he asked, intensely, but subdued in voice,

"and my pledges sworn to?—the treaty at the Castle?—the Duchess of Orléans?—the Grand Monarch?"

"Hush!" exclaimed Portsmouth, clutching his arm and looking cautiously about.

"If my services to you there were known," he continued, excitedly, "and to the great cause—the first step in making England pensioner of France and Holland the vassal of Louis—my head would pay the penalty. Can you not trust me still?"

"You are on strange ground to-night," suggested Portsmouth, tossing her head impatiently to indicate the terrace, as she tried to fathom the real man.

"I thought the King might pass this way, and came to see," hastily explained his lordship, observing that she was reflecting upon the incongruity of his friendship for her and of his visit to Madame Gwyn.

"And if he did?" she asked, dubiously, not seeing the connection.

"I have a plan to make his visits less

frequent, Louise,—for your sweet sake and mine."

The man was becoming master. He had pleased her, and she was beginning to believe.

"Yes?" she said, in a way which might mean anything, but certainly that she was listening, and intently listening too.

"You have servants you can trust?" he asked.

"I have," she replied as quickly; and she gloried in the thought that some at least were as faithful as Louis's court afforded.

"They must watch Nell's terrace here, night and day," he almost commanded in his eagerness, "who comes out, who goes in and the hour. She may forget her royal lover; and—well—we shall have witnesses in waiting. We owe this kindness—to his Majesty."

Portsmouth shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "*Mon Dieu!*" she said. "My servants have watched, my lord, already. The despatches would have been signed

and Louis's army on the march against the Dutch but for this vulgar player-girl, whom I have never seen. The King forgets all else."

The beautiful Duchess was piqued, indeed, that the English King should be so swayed. She felt that it was a personal disgrace—an insult to her charms and to her culture. She felt that the court knew it and laughed, and she feared that Louis soon would know. Nell Gwyn! How she hated her—scarce less than she loved Louis and her France.

"Be of good cheer," suggested Buckingham, soothingly; and he half embraced her. "My messenger shall await your signal, to carry the news to Louis and his army."

"There is no news," replied she, and turned upon him bitterly. "Charles evades me. Promise after promise to sup with me broken. I expected him to-night. My spies warned me he would not come; that he is hereabouts again. I followed myself to see. I have the papers with me always. If I can but see the King alone, it will

not take long to dethrone this up-start queen; wine, sweet words—England's sign-manual."

There was a confident smile on her lips as she reflected upon her personal powers, which had led Louis XIV. of France to entrust a great mission to her. His lordship saw his growing advantage. He would make the most of it.

"In the last event you have the ball!" he suggested, hopefully.

"Aye, and we shall be prepared," she cried. "But Louis is impatient to strike the blow for Empire unhampered by British sympathy for the Dutch, and the ball is—"

"A fortnight off," interrupted Buckingham, with a smile.

"And my messenger should be gone to-night," she continued, irritably. She approached him and whispered cautiously: "I have to-day received another note from Bouillon. Louis relies upon me to win from Charles his consent to the withdrawal of the British troops from Holland. This will insure the fall of Luxem-

bourg — the key to our success. You see, Buckingham, I must not fail. England's debasement shall be won."

There was a whistle down the path.

"Some one comes!" she exclaimed. "My chair!"

The page, who had given the signal, came running to her. Her chairmen too were prompt.

"Join me," she whispered to Buckingham, as he assisted her to her seat within.

"Later, Louise, later," he replied. "I must back to the neighbouring inn, before the huntsmen miss me."

Portsmouth waved to the chairmen, who moved silently away among the trees.

Buckingham stood looking after them, laughing.

"King Charles, a French girl from Louis's court will give me the keys to England's heart and her best honours," he muttered.

He glanced once again quickly at the windows of the house, and then, with altered purpose, swaggered away down a

side path. He was well pleased with his thoughts, well pleased with his chance interview with the beautiful Duchess and well pleased with himself. His brain wove and wove moonbeam webs of intrigue as he passed through the light and shadow of the night, wherein he would lend a helping hand to France and secure gold and power for his pains. He had no qualms of conscience; for must not his estates be kept, his dignity maintained? His purpose was clear. He would bring Portsmouth and the King closer together: and what England lost, he would gain — and, therefore, England; for was not he himself a part of England, and a great part?

Then too he must and would have Nell.

CHAPTER VI

Softly on tiptoe;
Here Nell doth lie.

AS often happens in life, when one suitor departs, another suitor knocks; and so it happened on this glorious night. The belated suitor was none other than Charles, the Stuart King. He seemed in the moonlight the picture of royalty, of romance, of dignity, of carelessness, of indifference—the royal vagabond of wit, of humour and of love. A well-thumbed "Hudibras" bulged from his pocket. He was alone, save for some pretty spaniels that played about him. He heeded them not. His thoughts were of Nell.

"Methought I heard voices tuned to love," he mused, as he glanced about. "What knave has spied out the secret of her bower? Ho, Rosamond, my Rosamond! Why came I here again to-night? What is there in this girl, this Nell? And

yet her eyes, how like the pretty maid's who passed me the cup that day at the cottage where we rested. Have I lived really to love—I, Solomon's rival in the entertainment of the fair,—to have my heart-strings torn by this roguish player?"

His reflections were broken in upon by the hunters' song in the distance. The music was so in harmony with the night that the forest seemed enchanted.

"Hush; music!" he exclaimed, softly, as he lent himself reluctantly to the spell, which pervaded everything as in a fairy-land. "Odds, moonlight was once for me as well the light for revels, bacchanals and frolics; yet now I linger another evening by Nell's terrace, mooning like a lover o'er the memory of her eyes and entranced by the hunters' song."

The singers were approaching. The King stepped quickly beneath the trellis, in an angle of the wall, and waited. Their song grew richer, as melodious as the night, but it struck a discord in his soul. He was thinking of a pair of eyes.

"Cease those discordant jangles," he

exclaimed impatiently to himself; "cease, I say! No song except for Nell! Nell! Pour forth your sweetest melody for Nell!"

The hunters stopped as by intuition before the terrace. A goodly company they were, indeed; there were James and Rochester and others of the court returning from the day's hunt. There was Buckingham too, who had rejoined them as they left the inn. The music died away.

"Whose voice was that?" asked James, as he caught the sound of the King's impatient exclamation from the corner of the wall.

"Some dreamer of the night," laughed Buckingham. "Yon love-sick fellow, methinks," he continued, pointing to a figure, well aloof beneath the trees, who was watching the scene most jealously. It was none other than Hart, who rarely failed to have an eye on Nell's terrace and who instantly stole away in the darkness.

"This is the home of Eleanor Gwyn we are passing," said Rochester, superflu-

ously; for all knew full well that it was Nelly's terrace.

"The love-lorn seer is wise," cried the Duke of York, quite forgetting his frigid self as he bethought him of Nell, and becoming quite lover-like, as he, sighing, said: "It were well to make peace with Nelly. Sing, hunters, sing!"

The command was quickly obeyed and the voices well attuned; for none were there but worshipped Nelly.

Hail to the moonbeams'
Crystal spray,
Nestling in Heaven
All the day,
Falling by night-time,
Silvery showers,
Twining with love-rhyme
Nell's fair bowers.

Sing, hunters, sing,
Gently carolling,
Here lies our hart—
Sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

Hail to the King's oaks,
Sentries blest,

Spreading their branches,
Guarding her rest,
Telling the breezes,
Hastening by:
"Softly on tiptoe;
Here Nell doth lie."

Sing, hunters, sing,
Gently carolling,
Here lies our hart—
Sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

The King heard the serenade to the end, then stepped gaily from his hiding-place.

"Brother James under Nelly's window!" he said, with a merry laugh.

"The King!" exclaimed James, in startled accents, as he realized the presence of his Majesty and the awkward position in which he and his followers were placed.

"The King!" repeated the courtiers. Hats were off and knees were bent respectfully.

"Brother," saluted Charles, as he embraced the Duke of York good-naturedly.

Buckingham withdrew a few steps. He was the most disturbed at the presence of the King at Nelly's bower. "As I feared," he thought. "Devil take his Majesty's meandering heart."

"Odsfish," laughed Charles, "we must guard our Nelly, or James and his saintly followers will rob her bower by moonlight."

The Duke of York assumed a devout and dignified mien. "Sire," he attempted to explain, but was interrupted quickly by his Majesty.

"No apologies, pious brother. God never damned a man for a little irregular pleasure."

There was a tittering among the courtiers as the King's words fell upon their ears.

James continued to apologize. "In faith, we were simply passing—" he said.

Again he was interrupted by his Majesty, who was in the best of humour and much pleased at the discomfiture of his over-religious brother.

"Lorenzo too was simply passing,"

he observed, "but the fair Jessica and some odd ducats stuck to his girdle; and the Jew will still be tearing his hair long after we are dust. Ah, Buckingham, they tell me you too have a taste for roguish Nelly. Have a care!"

The King strode across to Buckingham as he spoke; and while there was humour in his tone, there was injunction also.

Buckingham was too great a courtier not to see and feel it. He bowed respectfully, replying to his Majesty, "Sire, I would not presume to follow the King's eyes, however much I admire their taste."

"'Tis well," replied his Majesty, pointedly, "lest they lead thee abroad on a sleeveless mission."

Others had travelled upon such missions; Buckingham knew it well.

"But what does your Majesty here tonight, if we dare ask?" questioned James, who had just bethought him how to turn the tables upon the King.

Charles looked at his brother quizzically. "Humph!" he exclaimed, in his peculiar way. "Feeding my ducks in yon-

der pond." His staff swept indefinitely toward the park.

"Hunting with us were nobler business, Sire," suggested James, decisively.

"Not so," replied the King, quite seriously. "My way — I learn to legislate for ducks."

"'Twere wiser," preached York, "to study your subjects' needs."

The King's eyes twinkled. "I go among them," he said, "and learn their needs, while you are praying, brother."

At this sally, Rochester became convulsed, though he hid it well; for Rochester was not as pious as brother James.

York, feeling that the sympathy was against him, grew more earnest still. "I wish your Majesty would have more care," he pleaded. "'Tis a crime against yourself, a crime against the state, a crime against the cavaliers who fought and died for you, to walk these paths alone in such uncertain times. Perchance, 't is courting lurking murder!"

"No kind of danger, James," answered the King, with equal seriousness, laying

a hand kindly on his brother's shoulder; "for I am sure no man in England would take away my life to make you King."

There was general laughter from the assembled party; for all dared laugh, even at the expense of the Duke of York, when the jest was of the King's making. Indeed, not to laugh at a king's jest has been in every age, in or out of statutes, the greatest crime. Fortunately, King Charles's wit warranted its observation.

James himself grew mellow under the influence of the gaiety, and almost affectionately replied, "God grant it be ever so, brother." He then turned the thought. "We heard but now an ambassador from Morocco's court is lately landed. He brings your Majesty two lions and thirty ostriches."

"Odsfish, but he is kind," replied the King, reflecting on the gift. "I know of nothing more proper to send by way of return than a flock of geese."

His brow arched quizzically, as he glanced over the circle of inert courtiers ranged about him. "Methinks I can count

them out at Whitehall," he thought.

"He seeks an audience to-night. Will you grant it, Sire?" besought James.

"'Sheart!" replied the King. "Most cheerfully, I'll lead you from Nelly's terrace, brother. Hey! Tune up your throats. On to the palace."

CHAPTER VII

Come down!
Come up!

THE music died away among the old oaks in the park. Before its final notes were lost on the air, however, hasty steps and a chatter of women's voices came from the house. The door leading to the terrace was thrown quickly open, and Nell appeared. Her eyes had the bewildered look of one who has been suddenly awakened from a sleep gilded with a delightful dream.

She had, indeed, been dreaming—dreaming of the King and of his coming. As she lay upon her couch, where she had thrown herself after the evening meal, she had seemed to hear his serenade.

Then the music ceased and she started up and rubbed her eyes. It was only to see the moonlight falling through the latticed windows on to the floor of her dainty

chamber. She was alone and she bethought herself sadly that dreams go by contraries.

Once again, however, the hunters' song had arisen on her startled ear — and had died away in sweet cadences in the distance. It was not a dream!

As she rushed out upon the terrace, she called Moll reprovingly; and, in an instant, Moll was at her side. The faithful girl had already seen the hunters and had started a search for Nell; but the revellers had gone before she could find her.

"What is it, dear Nell?" asked her companion, well out of breath.

"Why did you not call me, cruel girl?" answered Nell, impatiently. "To miss seeing so many handsome cavaliers! Where is my kerchief?"

Nell leaned over the balustrade and waved wildly to the departing hunters. A pretty picture she was too, in her white flowing gown, silvered by the moonlight.

"See, see," she exclaimed to Moll, with wild enthusiasm, "some one waves back. It may be he, sweet mouse. Heigh-ho! Why don't you wave, Moll?"

Before Moll could answer, a rich bugle-horn rang out across the park.

"The hunters' horn!" cried Nell, gleefully. "Oh, I wish I were a man — except when one is with me"; and she threw both arms about Moll, for the want of one better to embrace. She was in her varying mood, which was one 'twixt the laughter of the lip and the tear in the eye.

"I have lost my brother!" ejaculated some one; but she heard him not.

This laconic speech came from none other than the King, who in a bantering mood had returned.

"I went one side a tree and pious James t'other; and here I am by Nelly's terrace once again," he muttered. "Oh, ho! wench!" His eyes had caught sight of Nell upon the terrace.

He stepped back quickly into the shadow and watched her playfully.

Nell looked longingly out into the night, and sighed heavily. She was at her wit's end. The evening was waning, and the King, as she thought, had not come.

"Why do you sigh?" asked Moll, consolingly.

"I was only looking down the path, dear heart," replied Nell, sadly.

"He will come," hopefully suggested Moll, whose little heart sympathized deeply with her benefactress.

"Nay, sweet," said Nell, and she shook her curls while the moonbeams danced among them, "he is as false as yonder moon — as changeable of face."

She withdrew her eyes from the path and they fell upon the King. His Majesty's curiosity had quite over-mastered him, and he had inadvertently stepped well into the light. The novelty of hearing himself derided by such pretty lips was a delicious experience, indeed.

"The King!" she cried, in joyous surprise.

Moll's diplomatic effort to escape at the sight of his Majesty was not half quick enough for Nell, who forthwith forced her companion into the house, and closed the door sharply behind her, much to the delight of the humour-loving King.

Nell then turned to the balustrade and, somewhat confused, looked down at his

Majesty, who now stood below, calmly gazing up at her, an amused expression on his face.

"Pardon, your Majesty," she explained, falteringly, "I did not see you."

"You overlooked me merely," slyly suggested Charles, swinging his stick in the direction of the departed hunters.

"I' faith, I thought it was you waved answer, Sire," quickly replied Nell, whose confusion was gone and who was now mistress of the situation and of herself.

"No, Nell; I hunt alone for my hart."

"You hunt the right park, Sire."

"Yea, a good preserve, truly," observed the King. "I find my game, as I expected, flirting, waving kerchiefs, making eyes and throwing kisses to the latest passer-by."

"I was encouraging the soldiers, my liege. That is every woman's duty to her country."

"And her country*men*," said he, smiling. "You are very loyal, Nell. Come down!" It was irritating, indeed, to be kept so at arm's length.

She gazed down at him with impish sweetness—down at the King of England!

"Come up!" she said, leaning over the balustrade.

"Nay; come down if you love me," pleaded the King.

"Nay; come up if you love me," said Nell, enticingly.

"Egad! I am too old to climb," exclaimed the Merry Monarch.

"Egad! I am too young yet for the downward path, your Majesty," retorted Nell.

The King shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"You will fall if we give you time," he said.

"To the King's level?" she asked, slyly, then answered herself: "Mayhap."

Thus they stood like knights after the first tilt. Charles looked up at Nell, and Nell looked down at Charles. There was a moment's silence. Nell broke it.

"I am surprised you happen this way, Sire."

"With such eyes to lure me?" asked the King, and he asked earnestly too.

"Tush," answered Nell, coyly, "your tongue will lead you to perdition, Sire."

"No fear!" replied he, dryly. "I knelt in church with brother James but yesterday."

"In sooth, quite true!" said Nell, approvingly, as she leaned back against the door and raised her eyes innocently toward the moon. "I sat in the next pew, Sire, afraid to move for fear I might awake your Majesty."

The King chuckled softly to himself. Nell picked one of the flowers that grew upon the balustrade.

"Ah, you come a long-forgotten path to-night," she said abruptly.

The King was alert in an instant. He felt that he had placed himself in a false light. He loved the witch above despite himself.

"I saw thee twa evenings ago, lass," he hastily asserted, in good Scotch accents, somewhat impatiently.

"And is not that a long time, Sire,"

questioned Nell, "or did Portsmouth make it fly?"

"Portsmouth!" exclaimed Charles. He turned his face away. "Can it be my conscience pricks me?" he thought. "You know more of her than I, sweet Nell," he then asserted, with open manner.

"Marry, I know her not at all and never saw her," said Nell. "I shall feel better when I do," she thought.

"It were well for England's peace you have not met," laughed Charles.

"Faith and troth," said Nell, "I am happy to know our King has lost his heart."

"Odso! And why?" asked Charles; and he gazed at Nell in his curious uncertain way, as he thought it was never possible to tell quite what she meant or what she next would think or say or do.

"We feared he had not one to lose," she slyly suggested. "It gives us hope."

"To have it in another's hand as you allege?" asked Charles.

"Marry, truly!" answered Nell, decisively. "The Duchess may find it more

than she can hold and toss it over."

"How now, wench!" exclaimed the King, with assumption of wounded dignity. "My heart a ball for women to bat about!"

"Sire, two women often play at rackets even with a king's heart," softly suggested Nell.

"Odsfish," cried the King, with hands and eyes raised in mock supplication. "Heaven help me then."

Again the hunters' horn rang clearly on the night.

"The horn! The horn!" said Nell, with forced indifference. "They call you, Sire."

There was a triumphantly bewitching look in her eyes, however, as she realized the discomfiture of the King. He was annoyed, indeed. His manner plainly betokened his desire to stay and his irritation at the interruption.

"'Tis so!" he said at last, resignedly. "The King is lost."

The horn sounded clearer. The hunters were returning.

"Again — nearer!" exclaimed Charles,

fretfully. His mind reverted to his pious brother; and he laughed as he continued: "Poor brother James and his ostriches!"

He could almost touch Nell's fingertips.

"Farewell, sweet," he said; "I must help them find his Majesty or they will swarm here like bees. Yet I must see my Nell again to-night. You have bewitched me, wench. Sup with me within the hour —at— Ye Blue Boar Inn. Can you find the place?"

There was mischief in Nell's voice as she leaned upon the balustrade. She dropped a flower; he caught it.

"Sire, I can always find a rendezvous," she answered.

"You're the biggest rogue in England," laughed Charles.

"Of a *subject*, perhaps, Sire," replied Nell, pointedly.

"That is treason, sly wench," rejoined the King; but his voice grew tender as he added: "but treason of the tongue and not the heart. Adieu! Let that seal thy lips, until we meet."

He threw a kiss to the waiting lips upon the balcony.

"Alack-a-day," sighed Nell, sadly, as she caught the kiss. "Some one may break the seal, my liege; who knows?"

"How now?" questioned Charles, jealously.

Nell hugged herself as she saw his fitful mood; for beneath mock jealousy she thought she saw the germ of true jealousy. She laughed wistfully as she explained: "It were better to come up and seal them tighter, Sire."

"Minx!" he chuckled, and tossed another kiss.

The horn again echoed through the woods. He started.

"Now we 'll despatch the affairs of England, brother; then we 'll sup with pretty Nelly. Poor brother James! Heaven bless him and his ostriches."

He turned and strode quickly through the trees and down the path; but, as he went, ever and anon he called: "Ye Blue Boar Inn, within the hour!"

Each time from the balcony in Nell's

sweet voice came back — "Ye Blue Boar Inn, within the hour! I will not fail you, Sire!"

Then she too disappeared. There was again a slamming of doors and much confusion within the house. There were calls and sounds of running feet.

The door below the terrace opened suddenly, and Nell appeared breathless upon the lawn — at her heels the constant Moll. Nell ran some steps down the path, peering vainly through the woods after the departing King. Her bosom rose and fell in agitation.

"Oh, Moll, Moll, Moll!" she exclaimed, fearfully. "He has been at Portsmouth's since high noon. I could see it in his eyes." Her own eyes snapped as she thought of the hated French rival, whom she had not yet seen, but whose relation to the royal household, as she thought, gave her the King's ear almost at will.

She walked nervously back and forth, then turned quickly upon her companion, asking her, who knew nothing, a hundred questions, all in one little breath.

"What is she? How looks she? What is her charm, her fascination, the magic of her art? Is she short, tall, fat, lean, joyous or sombre? I must know."

"Oh, Nell, what will you do?" cried Moll in fearful accents as she watched her beautiful mistress standing passion-swayed before her like a queen in the moonlight, the little toe of her slipper nervously beating the sward as she general-like marshalled her wits for the battle.

"See her, see her,—from top to toe!" Nell at length exclaimed. "Oh, there will be sport, sweet mouse. France again against England—the stake, a King!"

She glanced in the direction of the house and cried joyously as she saw Strings hobbling toward her.

"Heaven ever gave me a man in waiting," she said, gleefully. "Poor fellow, he limps from youthful, war-met wounds. Comrade, are you still strong enough for service?"

"To the death for you, Mistress Nell!" he faithfully replied.

"You know the Duchess of Ports-

mouth, and where she lives?" artfully inquired Nell.

"Portsmouth!" he repeated, excitedly. "She was here but now, peeping at your windows."

Nell stood aghast. Her face grew pale, and her lips trembled.

"Here, here!" she exclaimed, incredulously. "The imported hussy!"

She turned hotly upon Strings, as she had upon poor Moll, with an array of questions which almost paralyzed the old fiddler's wits. "How looks she? What colour eyes? Does her lip arch? How many inches span her waist?"

Strings looked cautiously about, then whispered in Nell's ear. He might as well have talked to all London; for Nell, in her excitement, repeated his words at the top of her voice.

"You overheard? Great Heavens! Drug the King and win the rights of England while he is in his cups? Bouillon — the army — Louis — the Dutch! A conspiracy!"

"Oh, dear; oh, dear," came from Moll's

trembling lips.

Nell's wits were like lightning playing with the clouds. Her plans were formed at once.

"Fly, fly, comrade," she commanded Strings. "Overtake her chair. Tell the Duchess that her beloved Charles—she will understand—entreats her to sup at Ye Blue Boar Inn, within the hour. Nay, she will be glad enough to come. Say he awaits her alone. Run, run, good Strings, and you shall have a hospital to nurse these wounds, as big as Noah's ark; and the King shall build it for the message."

Strings hastened down the path, fired by Nell's inspiration, with almost the eagerness of a boy.

"Run, run!" cried Nell, in ecstasy, as she looked after him and dwelt gleefully upon the outcome of her plans.

He disappeared through the trees.

"Heigh-ho!" she said, with a light-hearted step. "Now, Moll, we'll get our first sight of the enemy."

She darted into the house, dragging poor Moll after her.

CHAPTER VIII

"*And the man that is drunk is as great as a king.*"

AN old English inn! What spot on earth is more hospitable, even though its floor be bare and its tables wooden? There is a homely atmosphere about it, with its cobwebbed rafters, its dingy windows, its big fireplace, where the rough logs crackle, and its musty ale. It has ever been a home for the belated traveller, where the viands, steaming hot, have filled his soul with joy. Oh, the Southdown mutton and the roasts of beef!

If England has given us naught else, she should be beloved for her wealth of inns, with their jolly landlords and their pert bar-maids and their lawns for the game of bowls. May our children's children find them still unchanged.

In a quaint corner of London, there stood such an inn, in the days of which we speak; and it lives in our story. When

it was built, no one knew and none cared. Tradition said that it had been a rendezvous for convivial spirits for ages that had gone. A sign hung from the door, on which was a boar's head; and under it, in Old English lettering, might have been deciphered, if the reader had the wit to read, "Ye Blue Boar Inn."

It was the evening of a certain day, known to us all, in the reign of good King Charles. Three yesty spirits sat convivially enjoying the warmth of the fire upon the huge hearth. A keg was braced in the centre of the room. One of the merry crew — none other, indeed, than Swallow, a constable to the King — sat astride the cask, Don Quixote-like. In place of the dauntless lance, he was armed with a sturdy mug of good old ale. He sang gaily to a tune of his own, turning ever and anon for approbation to Buzzard, another spirit of like guild, who sat in a semi-maudlin condition by the table, and also to the moon-faced landlord of the inn, who encouraged the joviality of his guests — not forgetting to count

the cups which they demolished.

Swallow sang:

"*Here's a health unto his Majesty, with a fa, la, fa,*
Conversion to his enemies with a fa, la, fa,
And he that will not pledge his health,
I wish him neither wit nor wealth,
Nor yet a rope to hang himself—
With a fa, la, fa,
With a fa, la, fa."

The song ended in a triumphant wave of glory. The singer turned toward the fellow, Buzzard, and demanded indignantly:

"Why don't ye sing, knave, to the tune of the spigot?"

"My gullet's dry, Master Constable," stupidly explained his companion, as he too buried his face in the ale.

"Odsbud, thou knowest not the art, thou clod," retorted the constable, wisely.

"Nay; I can sing as well as any man," answered Buzzard, indignantly, "an I know when to go up and when to come down." He pointed stupidly, contrary to the phrase, first to the floor and then to the ceiling.

The landlord chuckled merrily, imitating him. "When to go up and when to come down!" he repeated with the same idiotic drawl and contradictory gesture.

"Go to, simple," replied Swallow, with tremendous condescension of manner. "Thy mother gave thee a gullet but no ear. Pass the schnapps."

He arose and staggered to the table.

"Good Master Constable, how singest thou?" sheepishly inquired Buzzard, as he filled Swallow's tankard for the twentieth time.

"Marry, by main force, thou jackpudding; how else?" demanded Swallow, pompously. He reseated himself with much effort astride the cask. "Oh, bury me here," he continued, looking into the foaming mug, and then buried his face deep in the ale.

His companions were well pleased with the toast; for each repeated it after him, each in his turn emphasizing the "me" and the "here"—"Oh, bury *me here!*" "Oh, bury *me here!*"—Buzzard in a voice many tones deeper than that of Swallow

and the landlord in a voice many tones deeper than that of Buzzard. Indeed, the guttural tones of the landlord bespoke the grave-yard.

The three faces were lost in the foam; the three sets of lips smacked in unison; and the world might have wagged as it would for these three jolly topers but for a woman's voice, calling sharply from the kitchen:

"Jenkins, love!"

"Body o' me!" exclaimed the landlord, almost dropping his empty tankard. "Coming, coming, my dear!" and he departed hastily.

The constable poked Buzzard in the ribs; Buzzard poked the constable in the ribs.

"Jenkins, love!" they exclaimed in one breath as the landlord returned, much to his discomfiture; and their eyes twinkled and wrinkled as they poked fun at the taverner.

"Body o' me! Thou sly dog!" said the constable, as he continued to twit him. "Whence came the saucy wench in

the kitchen, landlord? A dimpled cook, eh?"

The landlord's face grew serious with offended dignity as he attempted to explain.

"'T is my wife, Master Constable," he said.

"Marry, the new one?" inquired Swallow.

"'T is not the old one, Master Swallow," replied the old hypocrite, wiping away a forced tear. "Poor soul, she's gone, I know not where."

"I' faith, I trow she's still cooking, landlord," consolingly replied the constable, with tearful mien, pointing slyly downward for the benefit of Buzzard and steadying himself with difficulty on the cask.

"Bless Matilde," said the landlord as he wiped his eyes again, "I had a hard time to fill her place."

"Yea, truly," chuckled Swallow in Buzzard's ear, between draughts, "three long months from grave to altar."

"A good soul, a good soul, Master

Swallow," continued the landlord, with the appearance of deep affliction.

"And a better cook, landlord," said Swallow, sadly. "Odsbud, she knew a gooseberry tart. Patch your old wife's soul to your new wife's face, and you'll be a happy man, landlord. Here's a drop to her."

"Thank ye, Master Constable," replied the landlord, much affected. He looked well to the filling of the flagon in his hand, again wiped a tear from his eye and took a deep draught to the pledge of

"The old one!"

Swallow, with equal reverence, and with some diplomacy, placed his flagon to his lips with the pledge of

"The new one!"

Buzzard, who had not been heard from for some time, roused sufficiently to realize the situation, and broke out noisily on his part with

"The next one!"

A startled expression pervaded the landlord's face as he realized the meaning of Buzzard's words. He glanced woe-

fully toward the kitchen-door, lest the new wife might have overheard.

"Peace, Buzzard!" Swallow hastened to command, reprovingly. "Would ye raise a man's dead wife? Learn discretion from thy elders, an thou hop'st to be a married man."

"Marry, I do not hope," declared Buzzard, striking the table with his clenched hand. He had no time for matrimony while the cups were overflowing.

There was a quick, imperative knock at the door. The constable, Buzzard and the landlord, all started up in confusion and fear.

"Thieves," stammered Swallow, faintly, from behind the cask, from which he had dismounted at the first sign of danger. "They are making off with thy tit-bit-of-a-wife, landlord."

"Be there thieves in the neighbourhood, Master Constable?" whispered the landlord, in consternation.

"Why should his Majesty's constable be here else?" said Swallow, reaching for a pike, which trembled in his hand as if

he had the ague. "The country about's o'er-run with them; and I warrant 'tis thy new wife's blue eyes they are after." He steadied himself with the pike and took a deep draught of ale to steady his courage as well.

Buzzard started to crawl beneath the table, but the wary constable caught him by his belt and made a shield for the nonce of his trembling body.

The landlord's eyes bulged from their sockets as if a spirit from the nether regions had confronted him. The corners of his mouth, which ascended in harmony with his moon-face, twitched nervously. "Mercy me, sayest thou so?" he asked.

"And in thine ear," continued Swallow, consolingly, "and if thou see'st Old Rowley within a ten league, put thy new huswife's face under lock and key and Constable Swallow on the door to guard thy treasure."

It was not quite clear, however, what the constable meant; for "Old Rowley" was the name of the King's favourite race-

horse, of Newmarket fame, and had also come to be the nickname of the King himself. Charles assumed it good-naturedly. Assuredly, neither might be expected as a visitor to Ye Blue Boar.

There came a more spirited knock at the door. The constable sought a niche in the fireplace, whence he endeavoured to exclude Buzzard, who was loath to be excluded.

"Pass the Dutch-courage, good landlord," entreated Swallow, in a hoarse whisper.

The landlord started boldly toward the door, but his courage failed him. "Go thou, Master Constable," he exclaimed.

"Go thou thyself," wisely commanded Swallow, with the appearance of much bravery, though one eye twitched nervously in the direction of the kitchen-door in the rear, as a possible means of exit. "There's no need of his Majesty's constable till the battery be complete. There must be an action and intent, saith the law."

"Old Rowley!" muttered the landlord,

fearfully. "Good Master Constable—" he pleaded. His face, which was usually like a roast of beef, grew livid with fear.

Swallow, however, gave him no encouragement, and the landlord once more started for the door.

On the way his eye lighted on a full cask which was propped up in the corner. Instinct was strong in him, even in death. It had been tapped, and it would be unsafe to leave it even for an instant within reach of such guests. He stopped and quickly replaced the spigot with a plug.

There was a third knock at the door —louder than before.

"Anon, anon!" he called, hastily turning and catching up the half-filled flagon from the table. He disappeared in the entry-way.

The brave representatives of the King's law craned their necks, but they could hear nothing. As the silence continued, courage was gradually restored to them; and, with the return of courage, came the desire for further drink.

Swallow again seized his pike and staggered toward the entry-way to impress his companion with his bravery.

Buzzard caught the spirit of the action. "Marry, I'd be a constable, too, an it were to sit by the fire and guard a pretty wench," he said. His face glowed in anticipation of such happiness as he glanced through the half-open door to the kitchen, where the landlord's wife reigned.

"Egad, thou a constable!" ejaculated Swallow, contemptuously, throwing a withering glance in the direction of his comrade. "Thou ignoramamus! Old Rowley wants naught but brave men and sober men like me to guard the law. Thou art a drunken Roundhead. One of Old Noll's vile ruffians. I can tell it by the wart on thy nose, knave."

"Nay, Master Constable," explained Buzzard, with an injured look at the mention of the wart, "it will soon away. Mother says, when I was a rosy babe, Master Wart was all in all; now I'm a man, Master Nose is crowding Neighbour Wart."

Swallow put his hands on his knees and laughed deeply. He contemplated the nose and person of his companion with a curious air and grew mellow with patronage.

"Thy fool's pate is not so dull," he said, half aloud, as he lighted a long pipe and puffed violently. "Thy wit would crack a quarter-staff. 'Sbud, would'st be my *posse?*"

This was, indeed, a concession on the part of the constable, who was overweighted with the dignity of the law which he upheld.

"Would'st be at my command," he continued, "to execute the King's *Statu quos* on rogues?"

"Marry, Constable Buzzard!" exclaimed the toper, gleefully. "Nay, and I would!"

"Marry, 'Constable' Buzzard!" replied Swallow, with tremendous indignation at the assumption of the fellow. "Nay, and thou would'st not, ass! By my patron saint—"

As the constable spoke, Buzzard's eye, with a leer, lighted on the cask in the

corner. He bethought him that it had a vent-hole even though the landlord had removed the spigot. He tiptoed unsteadily across the room, and proceeded with much difficulty to insert a straw in the small opening. He had thus already added materially to his maudlin condition, before Swallow discovered, with consternation and anger, the temporary advantage which the newly appointed *posse* had secured.

The cunning constable held carefully on to his tongue, however. He quietly produced a knife and staggered in his turn to the cask, unobserved by the unsuspecting Buzzard, whose eyes were tightly closed in the realization of a dream of his highest earthly bliss.

In an instant, the straw was clipped mid-way and the constable was enjoying the contents of the cask through the lower half, while Buzzard slowly awakened to the fact that his dream of bliss had vanished and that he was sucking a bit of straw which yielded naught.

"Here, knave," commanded Swal-

low, between breaths, pushing the other roughly aside, "thou hast had enough for a *posse*. Fill my mug, thou ignoranshibus."

Buzzard staggered toward the table to perform the bidding. "The flagon's empty, Master Constable," he replied, and forthwith loudly called out, "Landlord! Landlord!"

The constable dropped his straw and raised himself with difficulty to his full height, one hand firmly resting on the cask.

"Silence, fool of a *posse*," he commanded, when he had poised himself; "look ye, I have other eggs on the spit. To thy knee, sirrah; to thy knee, knave!"

Buzzard with difficulty and with many groans unsuspectingly obeyed the command. Swallow lifted the cask which not long since he had been riding and which had not as yet been tapped upon the shoulder of his kneeling companion. There was another groan.

"'T is too heavy, good Master Constable," cried Buzzard, in sore distress.

"Thou clodhopper!" yelled Swallow,

unsympathetically. "An thou cannot master a cask of wine, thou wilt never master the King's law. To the kitchen with thee; and keep thy eyes shut, thou knave of a *posse*." The constable made a dive for his pike and lantern, and enforced his authority by punctuating his remarks with jabs of the pike from behind at his powerless friend, who could scarce keep his legs under the weight of the cask.

As Buzzard tottered through the kitchen-door and made his exit, the constable, finding his orders faithfully obeyed, steadied himself with the pike to secure a good start; and then, with long staggering strides, he himself made his way after the *posse*, singing loudly to his heart's content:

"*Good store of good claret supplies everything*
And the man that is drunk is as great as a king."

CHAPTER IX

Three chickens!

THE door opened quickly, and in came King Charles; but who would have known him? The royal monarch had assumed the mien and garb of a ragged cavalier.

His eyes swept the inn quickly and approvingly. He turned upon the landlord, who followed him with dubious glances.

"Cook the chickens to a turn; and, mark you, have the turbot and sauce hot, and plenty of wine," he said. "Look to't; the vintage I named, Master Landlord. I know the bouquet and sparkle and the ripple o'er the palate."

"Who is to pay for all this, sir?" asked the landlord, aghast at the order.

"Insolent!" replied Charles. "I command it, sirrah."

"Pardon, sir," humbly suggested the

landlord; "guineas, and not words, command here."

"Odso!" muttered the King, remembering his disguise. "My temper will reveal me. Never fear, landlord," he boasted loudly. "You shall be paid, amply paid. I will pledge myself you shall be paid."

"Pardon, sir," falteringly repeated the landlord, rubbing his hands together graciously; "but the order is a costly one and you—"

"Do not look flourishing?" said Charles, as he laughingly finished the sentence, glancing somewhat dubiously himself at his own dress. "Never judge a man by his rags. Plague on't, though; I would not become my own creditor upon inspection. Take courage, good Master Landlord; England's debt is in my pocket."

"How many to supper, sir?" asked the landlord, fearful lest he might offend.

"Two! Two! Only two!" decisively exclaimed Charles. "A man is an extravagant fool who dines more. The third is expensive and in the way. Eh, landlord?"

The King winked gaily at the landlord, who grinned in response and dropped his eyes more respectfully.

"Two, sir," acquiesced the landlord.

"Aye, mine host, thou art favoured beyond thy kind," laughed Charles, knowingly, as he dwelt upon the joys of a feast incognito alone with Nell. "A belated goddess would sup at thy hostelry." The landlord's eyes grew big with astonishment. "I will return. Obey her every wish, dost hear, her every wish, and leave the bill religiously to me." Charles swaggered gaily up the steps to the entry-way and out the door.

The moon-face of the inn-keeper grew slowly serious. He could not reconcile the shabby, road-bespattered garments of the strange cavalier with his princely commands.

"Body o' me!" he muttered, lighting one by one the candles in the room, till the rafters fairly glowed in expectation of the feast. "Roundhead-beggar, on my life! Turbot and capons and the best vintage! The King could not have better than this

rogue. Marry, he shall have the best in the larder; but Constable Swallow shall toast his feet in the kitchen, with a mug of musty ale to make him linger."

The corners of the mouth in the moon-face ascended in a chuckle.

"His ragged lordship'll settle the bill very religiously," he thought, "or sleep off his swollen Roundhead behind the bars."

He passed into the kitchen and gave the order for the repast. As he returned, there was a tap at the door; and he hastened to the window.

"Bless me, a petticoat!" he cried. "Well, he's told the truth for once. She's veiled. Ashamed of her face or ashamed of him."

He opened the door and ushered in a lady dressed in white; across her face and eyes was thrown a scarf of lace.

"Not here?" questioned the newcomer, glancing eagerly about the room and peeping into every nook and corner without the asking, to the astonishment of the inn-keeper.

"Not here?" she asked herself again, excitedly. "Tell me, tell me, is this Ye Blue Boar Inn?"

"Yes, lady—" replied the landlord, graciously.

"Good, good! Has she been here? Have you seen her?"

"Who, the goddess?" asked the landlord, stupidly.

"The goddess!" retorted Nell, for it was none other, with humorous irony of lip. "How can you so belie the Duchess?" She laughed merrily at the thought.

There was a second knock; and the landlord again hastened to the window.

"'T is she; 'tis she!" exclaimed Nell, excitedly. "Haste ye, man; I am in waiting! What has she on? How is she dressed?"

"Body o' me!" exclaimed the landlord, in awe, as he craned his neck at the sash. "'T is a lady of quality."

"Bad quality," ejaculated Nell.

"She has come in a chair of silver," cried the landlord.

"My chair shall be of beaten gold,

then," thought Nell, with a twinkle of the eye. "Charles, you must raise the taxes."

"Mercy me, the great lady's coming in," continued the landlord, beside himself in his excitement.

"She shall be welcome, most welcome, landlord," observed Nell promptly.

"Body o' me! What shall I say?" asked the landlord, in trembling accents.

"Faith and troth," replied Nell, coming to his rescue, "I will do the parlez-vousing with her ladyship. Haste thee, thou grinning fat man." She glided quickly into a corner of the old fireplace, where she could not be observed so readily.

The Duchess of Portsmouth entered, with all the haughty grandeur of a queen. She glanced about contemptuously, and her lip could be seen to curl, even through the veil which partially hid her face.

"This *bourgeois* place," she said, "to sup with the King! It cannot be! *Garçon!*"

"What a voice," reflected Nell, in her hiding-place, "in which to sigh, 'I love you.'"

"Barbarous place!" exclaimed Ports-

mouth. "His Majesty must have lost his wits."

She smiled complacently, however, as she reflected that the King might consent even within these walls and that his sign-manual, if so secured, would be as binding as if given in a palace.

"*Garçon!*" again she called, irritably.

Nell was meanwhile inspecting her rival from top to toe. Nothing escaped her quick eye. "I'll wager her complexion needs a veil," she muttered, with vixenish glee. "That gown is an insult to her native France."

"*Garçon;* answer me," commanded Portsmouth, fretfully.

The landlord had danced about her grace in such anxiety to please that he had displeased. He had not learned the courtier's art of being ever present, yet never in the way.

"Yes, your ladyship," he stupidly repeated again and again. "What would your ladyship?"

"Did a prince leave commands for supper?" she asked, impatiently.

"No, your ladyship," he replied, obsequiously. "A ragged rogue ordered a banquet and then ran away, your ladyship."

"How, sirrah?" she questioned, angrily, though the poor landlord had meant no discourtesy.

"If he knew his guests, he would ne'er return," softly laughed Nell.

"*Parbleu*," continued Portsmouth, in her French, impatient way, now quite incensed by the stupidity of the landlord, "a cavalier would meet me at Ye Blue Boar Inn; so said the messenger."

She suddenly caught sight of Nell, whose biting curiosity had led her from her hiding-place. "This is not the rendezvous," she reflected quickly. "We were to sup alone."

The landlord still bowed and still uttered the meaningless phrase: "Yes, your ladyship."

The Duchess was at the end of her patience. "*Mon Dieu*," she exclaimed, "do you know nothing, sirrah?"

The moon-face beamed. The head

bowed and bowed and bowed; the hands were rubbed together graciously.

"Good lack, I know not; a supper for a king was ordered by a ragged Roundhead," he replied. "Here are two petticoats, your ladyship. When I know which petticoat is which petticoat, your ladyship, I will serve the dinner."

The tavern-keeper sidled toward the kitchen-door. As he went out, he muttered, judiciously low: "I would n't give a ha'penny for the choice."

"Beggar!" snapped Portsmouth. "Musty place, musty furniture, musty *garçon*, musty everything!"

She stood aloof in the centre of the room as if fearful lest she might be contaminated by her surroundings.

Nell approached her respectfully.

"You may like it better after supper, madame," she suggested, mildly. "A good spread, sparkling wine and most congenial company have cast a halo o'er more time-begrimed rafters than these."

"Who are you, madame?" inquired the Duchess, haughtily.

"A fellow-passenger on the earth," gently replied Nell, "and a lover of good company, and — some wine."

"Yes?" said the Duchess, in a way that only a woman can ask and answer a question with a "yes" and with a look such as only a woman can give another woman when she asks and answers that little question with a "yes."

There was a moment's pause.

The Duchess continued: "Perhaps you have seen the cavalier I await."

"Marry, not I," replied Nell, promptly; and she bethought her that she had kept a pretty sharp lookout for him, too.

"Is this a proper place for a lady to visit?" pompously inquired the Duchess.

"You raise the first doubt," said Nell quickly.

"Madame!" exclaimed Portsmouth, interrupting her, with fiery indignation.

"I say, you are the first to question the propriety of the place," explained Nell, apologetically, though she delighted inwardly at the intended shot which she had given her grace.

"I came by appointment," continued the Duchess; "but it seems I was misled. *Garçon*, my chair!"

The Duchess made a move toward the door, but Nell's words stopped her.

"Be patient, Duchess! He is too gallant to desert you."

"She knows me!" thought Portsmouth. She turned sharply upon the stranger. "I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance, madame."

"Such is my loss, not yours," replied Nell, suavely.

"Remove your veil," commanded the Duchess; and her eyes flashed through her own.

"I dare not before the beauty of Versailles," continued Nell, sweetly. "Remove yours first. Then I may take mine off unseen."

"Do I know you?" suspiciously inquired Portsmouth.

"I fear not," said Nell, meekly, and she courtesied low. "I am but an humble player—called Nell Gwyn."

The Duchess raised herself to her full height.

"Nell Gwyn!" she hissed, and she fairly tore off her veil.

"Your grace's most humble servant," said Nell, again courtesying low and gracefully removing her veil.

"This is a trap," exclaimed the Duchess, as she realized the situation.

"Heaven bless the brain that set it then," sweetly suggested Nell.

"Your own, minx," snapped Portsmouth. "I'll not look at the hussy!" she muttered. She crossed the room and seated herself upon the bench, back to Nell.

"Your grace would be more kind if you knew my joy at seeing you."

"And why?" asked the Duchess, ironically.

"I would emulate your warmth and amiability," tenderly responded Nell.

"Yes?" said Portsmouth; but how much again there was in her little "yes," accented as it was with a French shrug.

"I adore a beautiful woman," continued Nell, "especially when I know her to be—"

"A successful rival?" triumphantly

asked the Duchess.

"A rival!" exclaimed Nell, in well-feigned astonishment, still toying with the Duchess's temper. "Is the poor actress so honoured in a duchess's thought? Your grace is generous."

If all the angels had united, they could not have made her speech more sweet or her manner more enticing.

"I presumed you might conceive it so," replied Portsmouth, with mocking, condescending mien.

Nell approached her timidly and spoke softly, lovingly, subserviently.

"A rival to the great Duchess of Portsmouth!" she said. "Perish the thought! It is with trepidation I look upon your glorious face, madame; a figure that would tempt St. Anthony; a foot so small it makes us swear the gods have lent invisible wings to waft you to your conquest. Nay, do not turn your rosy lip in scorn; I am in earnest, so in earnest, that, were I but a man, I would bow me down your constant slave—unless perchance you should grow fat."

The turn was delicious: Nell's face was a study; and so was Portsmouth's.

The Duchess sprang to her feet, realizing fully for the first time that she had been trapped and trifled with. "Hussy! Beware your own lacings," she angrily exclaimed, turning now full face upon her adversary.

Nell was leaning against the table across the room, quietly observing Portsmouth upon the word-wrack. Her whole manner had changed. She watched with evident delight the play of discomfiture, mingled with contempt, upon the beautiful Duchess's face.

"*Me* fat!" she derisively laughed. "Be sure I shall never grow too much so. And have not the stars said I shall ne'er grow old?"

"Your stars are falser than yourself," tartly snapped the Duchess.

"Mayhap," said Nell, still gleeful; "but mark you this truth: I shall reign queen of Love and Laughter while I live, and die with the first wrinkle."

She was interrupted by his Majesty,

who, unsuspecting, swaggered into the room in buoyant spirits.

"The King!" exclaimed Nell, as she slyly glanced over her shoulder.

The King looked at one woman and then at the other in dismay and horror.

"Scylla and Charybdis!" he muttered, nervously, glancing about for means of escape. "All my patron-saints protect me!"

Nell was by his side in an instant.

"Good even' to your Majesty," she roguishly exclaimed. "How can I ever thank you, Sire, for inviting the Duchess to sup with me! I have been eager to meet her ladyship."

"Ods-pitikins," he thought, "a loophole for me."

"Well,—you see—" he said, "a little surprise, Nelly,—a little surprise—for me." The last two words were not audible to his hearers. He looked at the beautiful rivals an instant, then ventured, "I hoped to be in time to introduce you, ladies."

"Oh, your Majesty," asserted Nell, consolingly, "we are already quite well

acquainted. I knew her grace through her veil."

"No doubt on't," observed the King, knowingly.

"Yes, Sire," said the Duchess, haughtily, casting a frigid glance at Nell, "I warrant we understand each other perfectly."

"Better and better," said Charles, with a sickly laugh.

His Majesty saw rocks and shoals ahead, and his wits could find no channel of escape. He turned in dire distress upon Nell, who stood aloof. She looked up into his face with the innocence of a babe in every feature.

"Minx, this is your work!" he whispered.

"Yes, Sire!" she answered, mock-reprovingly, bending quite to the floor as she courtesied low.

"'Yes, Sire.' Baggage!" he exclaimed good-naturedly despite himself.

As he turned away, praying Heaven to see him out of the difficulty, he observed the landlord, who had just entered

with bread and cups, muttering some dubious invocations to himself. He clutched at this piece of human stupidity—like a drowning man clutching at a straw: "Ah, landlord, bring in what we live for; and haste ye, sirrah. The wine! The wine!"

"It is ready, sir," obsequiously replied the landlord, who had just sense enough in his dull cranium to reflect also, by way of complement, "So is Constable Swallow."

"Good news, good news!" cried Charles; and he tossed his plumed hat upon the sideboard, preparatory to the feast. "D'ye hear, my fair and loving friends? Come, it is impolite to keep the capons waiting. My arms; my arms!"

The King stepped gallantly between the ladies, making a bold play for peace. The Duchess took one arm formally. Nell seized the remaining arm and almost hugged his Majesty, nestling her head affectionately against his shoulder. Charles observed the decorum of due dignity. He was impartial to a fault; for he realized that there only lay his salvation.

The phalanx approached the feast in solemn march. The King tossed his head proudly and observed: "Who would not play the thorn with two such buds to blush on either side?"

There was a halt. The Duchess looked coldly at the table, then coldly at the King, then more coldly at Nell. The King looked at each inquiringly.

"I thought your Majesty ordered supper for three," she said. "It is set for two."

"Odsfish, for two!" cried Charles, glancing, anxiously, for the first time at the collation.

Nell had taken her place at the feast, regardless of formality. She was looking out for herself, irrespective of King or Duchess. She believed that a dinner, like the grave, renders all equal.

"Egad!" she exclaimed, as she dwelt upon the force of the Duchess's observation. "Our host is teaching us the virtues of economy."

The unsuspecting landlord re-entered at this moment, wine in hand, which he proceeded to place upon the table.

"What do you mean, knave, by this treachery!" almost shrieked the King at sight of him. "Another plate, dost hear; another plate, dog!"

"Bless me," explained the landlord, in confusion, "you said supper for two, sir; that a man was a fool who dined more; that the third was expensive and in the way."

"Villain!" cried Charles, in a hopeless effort to suppress the fellow, "I said two — two — beside myself. I never count myself in the presence of these ladies."

The landlord beat a hasty retreat.

The Duchess smiled a chilling smile, and asked complacently:

"Which one of us did you expect, Sire?"

"Yes, which did you expect, Sire?" laughed Nell.

"Oh, my head," groaned Charles; "well, well, — you see — Duchess, the matter lies in this wise —"

"Let me help your Majesty," generously interrupted Nell. "Her ladyship is ill at figures. You see, Charles and I are

one, and you make two, Duchess."

"I spoke to the King," haughtily replied the Duchess, not deigning to glance at Nell.

The King placed his hands upon his forehead in bewilderment.

"This is a question for the Prime Minister and sages of the realm in council."

"There are but two chairs, Sire," continued Portsmouth, coldly.

"Two chairs!" exclaimed the Merry Monarch, aghast, as he saw the breach hopelessly widening. "I am lost."

"That is serious, Sire," said Nell, sadly; and then her eye twinkled as she suggested, "but perhaps we might make out with one, for the Duchess's sake. I am so little."

She turned her head and laughed gaily, while she watched the Duchess's face out of the corner of her eye.

"'Sheart," sighed the King, "I have construed grave controversies of state in my time, but ne'er drew the line yet betwixt black eyes and blue, brunette and blonde, when both were present. Another

chair, landlord! Come, my sweethearts; eat, drink and forget."

The King threw himself carelessly into a chair in the hope that, in meat and drink, he might find peace.

"Aye," acquiesced Nell, who was already at work, irrespective of ceremony, "eat, drink and forget! I prefer to quarrel after supper."

"I do not," said the Duchess, who still stood indignant in the centre of the room.

Nell could scarce speak, for her mouthful; but she replied gaily, with a French shrug, in imitation of the Duchess:

"Oh, very well! I have a solution. Let's play sphinx, Sire."

Charles looked up hopefully.

"Anything for peace," he exclaimed. "How is't?"

"Why," explained Nell, with the philosophical air of a learned doctor, "some years before you and I thought much about the ways and means of this wicked world, your Majesty, the Sphinx spent her leisure asking people riddles; and if they could not answer, she ate them alive.

Give me some of that turbot. Don't stand on ceremony, Sire; for the Duchess is waiting."

The King hastened to refill Nell's plate.

"Thank you," laughed the vixen; "that will do for now. Let the Duchess propound a riddle from the depths of her subtle brain; and if I do not fathom it upon the instant, Sire, 't is the Duchess's —not Nell's— evening with the King."

"Odsfish, a great stake!" cried Charles. He arose with a serio-comic air, much pleased at the turn things were taking.

"Don't be too confident, madame," ironically suggested the Duchess; "you are cleverer in making riddles than in solving them."

As she spoke, the room was suddenly filled with savoury odour. The moon-faced landlord had again appeared, flourishing a platter containing two finely roasted chickens. His face glowed with pride and ale.

"The court's famished," exclaimed Charles, as he greeted the inn-keeper; "proceed!"

"Two capons! I have it," triumphantly thought Portsmouth, as she reflected upon a riddle she had once heard in far-off France. It could not be known in England. Nothing so clever could be known in England. She looked contemptuously at Nell, and then at the two chickens, as she propounded it.

"Let your wits find then three capons on this plate."

"Three chickens!" cried Charles, in wonderment, closely scrutinizing the two fowl upon the plate and then looking up inquiringly at the Duchess. "There are but two."

Nell only gurgled.

"Another glass, landlord, and I 'll see four," she said. "Here's to you two, and to me too." She drank gaily to her toast.

"That is not the answer, madame," coldly retorted the Duchess.

"Are we come to blows over two innocent chickens?" asked Charles, somewhat concerned still for the outcome. "Bring on your witnesses."

"This is one chicken, your Majesty," declared the Duchess. "Another's two; and two and one make three."

With much formality and something of the air of a conjurer, she counted the first chicken and the second chicken and then recounted the first chicken, in such a way as to make it appear that there were three birds in all.

The King, who was ill at figures, like all true spendthrifts, sat confused by her speech. Nell laughed again. The landlord, who was in and out, stopped long enough to enter upon his bill, in rambling characters, "3 chickens." This was all his dull ear had comprehended. He then piously proceeded on his way.

"Gadso!" exclaimed the King, woefully. "It is too much for me."

"Pooh, pooh, 't is too simple for you, Sire," laughed Nell. "I solved it when a child. Here is my bird; and here is your bird; and our dearest Duchess shall sup on her third bird!"

Nell quickly spitted one chicken upon a huge fork and so removed it to her own

plate. The second chicken, she likewise conveyed to his Majesty's. Then, with all the politeness which she only could summon, she bowed low and offered the empty platter to the Duchess.

Portsmouth struck it to the board angrily with her gloved hand and steadied herself against the table.

"Hussy!" she hissed, and forthwith pretended to grow faint.

Charles was at her elbow in an instant, supporting her.

"Oh,—Sire, I—" she continued, in her efforts to speak.

"What is it?" cried Charles, seriously, endeavouring to assist her. "You are pale, Louise."

"I am faint," replied she, with much difficulty. "Pardon my longer audience, Sire; I am not well. *Garçon*, my chair. Assist me to the door."

The fat landlord made a hasty exit, for him, toward the street, in his desire to help the great lady. Charles supported her to the threshold.

"Call a leech, Sire," cried Nell after

them, with mock sympathy. "Her grace has choked on a chicken-bone."

"Be still, wench," commanded the King. "Do not leave us, Louise; it breaks the sport."

"Nay," pleaded Nell also, "do not go because of this little merry-making, Duchess. I desire we may become better friends."

Her voice revived the Duchess.

"*Sans doute*, we shall, madame," Portsmouth replied, coldly. "*À mon bal! Pas adieu, mais au revoir.*"

The great Duchess courtesied low, kissed the King's hand, arose to her full height and, with an eye-shot at Nell, took her departure.

CHAPTER X

Arrest him yourself!

THE King stood at the door, thoughtfully reflecting on the temper of the departing Duchess. She was a maid of honour and, more than that, an emissary from his brother Louis of France. Gossip said he loved her, but it was not true, though he liked her company exceeding well when the mood suited. He regretted only the evening's incident, with the harsher feeling it was sure to engender.

Nell stood by the fireplace, muttering French phrases in humorous imitation of her grace. Observing the King's preoccupation, she tossed a *serviette* merrily at his head.

This brought his Majesty to himself again. He turned, and laughed as he saw her; for his brain and heart delighted in her merry-making. He loved her.

"What means this vile French?" she

asked, with delicious suggestion of the shrug, accent and manner of her vanquished rival.

"The Duchess means," explained the King, "that she gives a royal ball—"

"And invites me?" broke in Nell, quickly, placing her elbows upon a cask and looking over it impishly at Charles.

"And invites you *not*," said the King, "and so outwits you."

"By her porters' wits and not her own," retorted Nell.

She threw herself into a chair and became oblivious for the moment of her surroundings.

"The French hussy! So she gives a ball?" she thought. "Well, well, I'll be there! I'll teach her much. Oh, I'll be pretty, too, aye, very pretty. No fear yet of rivalry or harm for England."

Charles watched her amusedly, earnestly, lovingly. The vixen had fallen unconsciously into imitating again the Duchess's foreign ways, as an accompaniment even for her thoughts.

"*Sans doute*, we shall, *madame*," Nell

muttered audibly, with much gesticulating and a mocking accent. "*À mon bal! Pas adieu, mais au revoir.*"

The King came closer.

"Are you ill," he asked, "that you do mutter so and wildly act?"

"I was only thinking that, if I were a man," she said, turning toward him playfully, "I would love your Duchess to devotion. Her wit is so original, her repartee so sturdy. Your Majesty's taste in horses —and some women—is excellent."

She crossed the room gaily and threw herself laughing upon the bench. The King followed her.

"Heaven help the being, naughty Nell," he said, "who offends thy merry tongue; but I love thee for it." He sat down beside her in earnest adoration, then caught her lovingly in his arms.

"Love me?" sighed Nell, scarce mindful of the embrace. "Ah, Sire, I am but a plaything for the King at best, a caprice, a fancy—naught else."

"Nay, sweet," said Charles, "you have not read this heart."

"I have read it too deeply," replied Nell, with much meaning in her voice. "It is this one to-day, that one to-morrow, with King Charles. Ah, Sire, your love for the poor player-girl is summed up in three little words: 'I amuse you!'"

"Amuse me!" exclaimed Charles, thoughtfully. "Hark ye, Nell! States may marry us; they cannot make us love. Ye Gods, the humblest peasant in my realm is monarch of a heart of his own choice. Would I were such a king!"

"What buxom country lass," asked Nell, sadly but wistfully, "teaches your fancy to follow the plough, my truant master?"

"You forget: I too," continued Charles, "have been an outcast, like Orange Nell, seeking a crust and bed."

He arose and turned away sadly to suppress his emotion. He was not the King of England now: he was a man who had suffered; he was a man among men.

"Forgive me, Sire," said Nell, tenderly, as a woman only can speak, "if I recall unhappy times."

"Unhappy!" echoed Charles, while Fancy toyed with Recollection. "Nell, in those dark days, I learned to read the human heart. God taught me then the distinction 'twixt friend and enemy. When a misled rabble had dethroned my father, girl, and murdered him before our palace gate, and bequeathed the glorious arts and progressive sciences to religious bigots and fanatics, to trample under foot and burn — when, if a little bird sang overjoyously, they cut out his tongue for daring to be merry — in some lonely home by some stranger's hearth, a banished prince, called Charles Stuart, oft found an asylum of plenty and repose; and in your eyes, my Nell, I read the self-same, loyal, English heart."

There was all the sadness of great music in his speech. Nell fell upon her knee, and kissed his hand, reverently.

"My King!" she said; and her voice trembled with passionate love.

He raised her tenderly and kissed her upon the lips.

"My queen," he said; and his voice

too trembled with passionate love.

"And Milton says that Paradise is lost," whispered Nell. Her head rested on the King's shoulder. She looked up — the picture of perfect happiness — into his eyes.

"Not while Nell loves Charles," he said.

"And Charles remembers Nell," her voice answered, softly.

Meanwhile, the rotund landlord had entered unobserved; and a contrast he made, indeed, to the endearing words of the lovers as at this instant he unceremoniously burst forth in guttural accents with:

"The bill! The bill for supper, sir!"

Nell looked at the King and the King looked at Nell; then both looked at the landlord. The lovers' sense of humour was boundless. That was their first tie; the second, their hearts.

"The bill!" repeated Nell, smothering a laugh. "Yes, we were just speaking of the bill."

"How opportune!" exclaimed Charles,

taking the cue. "We feared you would forget it, sirrah."

"See that it is right," ejaculated Nell.

The King glanced at the bill indifferently, but still could not fail to see "3 chickens" in unschooled hand. His eyes twinkled and he glanced at the landlord, but the latter avoided his look with a pretence of innocence.

"Gad," said Charles, with a swagger, "what are a few extra shillings to Parliament? Here, my man." He placed a hand in a pocket, but found it empty. "No; it is in the other pocket." He placed his hand in another, only to find it also empty. Then he went through the remaining pockets, one by one, turning them each out for inspection—his face assuming an air of mirthful hopelessness as he proceeded. He had changed his garb for a merry lark, but had neglected to change his purse. "Devil on't, I—have—forgotten—Odsfish, where is my treasurer?" he exclaimed at last.

"Your treasurer!" shrieked the landlord, who had watched Charles's search,

with twitching eyes. "Want your treasurer, do ye? Constable Swallow'll find him for ye. Constable Swallow! I knew you were a rascal, by your face."

Charles laughed.

This exasperated the landlord still further. He began to flutter about the room aimlessly, bill in hand. He presented it to Charles and he presented it to Nell, who would have none of it; while at intervals he called loudly for the constable.

"Peace, my man," entreated Nell; "be still for mercy's sake."

"Good lack, my lady," pleaded the landlord, in despair, "good lack, but you would not see a poor man robbed by a vagabond, would ye? Constable Swallow!"

The situation was growing serious indeed. The King was mirthful still, but Nell was fearful.

"Nell, have you no money to stop this heathen's mouth?" he finally ejaculated, as he caught up his bonnet and tossed it jauntily upon his head.

"Not a farthing," replied she, sharply. "I was invited to sup, not pay the bill."

"If the King knew this rascal," yelled the landlord at the top of his voice, pointing to Charles, "he would be behind the bars long ago."

This was too much for his Majesty, who broke into the merriest of laughs.

"Verily, I believe you," he admitted. Then he fell to laughing again, almost rolling off the bench in his glee.

"Master Constable," wildly repeated the landlord, at the kitchen-door. "Let my new wife alone; they are making off with the house."

Nell was filled with consternation.

"He'll raise the neighbourhood, Sire," she whispered to Charles. "Have you no money to stop this heathen's mouth?"

"Not even holes in my pockets," calmly replied the Merry Monarch.

"Odsfish, what company am I got into!" sighed Nell. She ran to the landlord and seized his arm in her endeavour to quiet him.

The landlord, however, was beside himself. He stood at the kitchen-door gesticulating ferociously and still shout-

ing at the top of his voice: "Constable Swallow! Help, help; thieves; Constable Swallow!"

Swallow staggered into the room with all his dignity aboard. Tankard in hand, he made a dive for the table, and catching it firmly, surveyed the scene.

Nell turned to her lover for protection.

"Murder, hic!" ejaculated the constable. "Thieves! What's the row?—Hic!"

"Arrest this blackguard," commanded the landlord, nervously, "this perfiler of honest men."

"Arrest!—You drunken idiot!" indignantly exclaimed Charles; and his sword cut the air before the constable's eyes.

Nell seized his arm. Her woman's intuition showed her the better course.

"You will raise a nest of them," she whispered. "You need your wits, Sire; not your sword."

"Nay; come on, I say," cried Charles, fearlessly. "We'll see what his Majesty's constables are made of."

"You rogue—*Posse!*" exclaimed Swal-

low, starting boldly for the King, then making a brilliant retreat, calling loudly for help, as the rapier tickled him in the ribs.

"You ruffian—*Posse!*" he continued to call, alternately, first to one and then to the other; for his fear paralyzed all but his tongue. "You outlaw—*Posse commiti-titous*—hic!"

Buzzard also now entered from his warm nest in the kitchen, so intoxicated that he vented his enthusiasm in song, which in this case seemed apt:

"*The man that is drunk is as great as a king.*"

"Another champion of the King's law!" ejaculated Charles, not without a shadow of contempt in his voice, once more assuming an attitude of defence.

"Oh, Charles!" pleaded Nell, again catching his arm.

"*Posse*, arrest that vagabond," commanded the constable, from a point of safety behind the table.

"Aye, aye, sir," replied the obedient Buzzard. "On what charge—hic?"

"He's a law-breaker and a robber!" yelled the watchful landlord.

"He called the law a drunken idiot. Hic—hic!" woefully wailed Swallow. "Odsbud, that's treason! Arrest him, *posse*—hic!"

"Knave, I arrest—hic!" asserted Buzzard.

The *posse* started boldly enough for his game, but was suddenly brought to a standstill in his reeling course by the sharp point of the rapier playing about his legs. He made several indignant efforts to overcome the obstacle. The point of the blade was none too gentle with him, even as he beat a retreat; and his enthusiasm waned.

"Arrest him yourself—hic!" he exclaimed.

Swallow's face grew red with rage. To have his orders disobeyed fired him with much more indignation of soul than the escape of the ruffian, who was simply defrauding the landlord of a dinner. He turned hotly upon the insubordinate *posse*, crying:

"I'll arrest you, you Buzzard—hic!"

"I'll arrest you, you Swallow—hic!" with equal dignity retorted Buzzard.

"I'm his Majesty's constable—hic!" hissed Swallow, from lips charged with air, bellows-like.

"I'm his Majesty's *posse*—hic!" hissed Buzzard in reply.

The two drunken representatives of the law seized each other angrily. The landlord, in despair, endeavoured hopelessly to separate them.

"A wrangle of the generals," laughed Charles. "Now is our time." He looked about quickly for an exit.

"Body o' me! The vagabonds'll escape," shouted the landlord.

"Fly, fly!" said Nell. "This way, Charles."

She ran hastily toward the steps leading to the entry-way; the King assisted her.

"Stop, thief! Stop, thief!" screamed the landlord. "The bill! The bill!"

"Send it to the Duchess!" replied Nell, gaily, as she and the Merry Monarch darted into the night.

The landlord turned in despair, to find the drunken champions of the King's law in a struggling heap upon the floor. He raised his foot and took out vengeance where vengeance could be found.

CHAPTER XI

In the field, men; at court, women!

IT was the evening of Portsmouth's long-awaited *bal masqué*. Music filled her palace with rhythmic sound. In the gardens, its mellowing strains died away among the shrubs and over-hanging boughs. In every nook and corner wandered at will the nobility — the richest — the greatest — in the land.

None entertain like the French; and the Duchess had, indeed, exhausted French art in turning the grand old place into a land of ravishing enchantment, with its many lights, its flowers, its works of art. Her abode was truly an enlivening scene, with its variety of maskers, bright dominoes and vizards.

The King was there and took a merry part in all the sport, although, beneath his swaggering abandon, there lurked a vein of sadness. He laughed heartily, he

danced gaily, he jested with one and all; but his manner was assumed. The shrewdest woman's eye could not have seen it; though she might have felt it. Brother James too enjoyed the dance, despite his piety; and Buckingham, Rochester and a score of courtiers beloved by the King entered mirthfully into the scene, applauding the Duchess's entertainment heartily.

As the evening wore apace, the merry maskers grew merrier and merrier. In a drawing-room adjoining the great ballroom, a robber-band, none other than several gallants, whose identity was concealed by silken vizards, created huge amusement by endeavouring to steal a kiss from Lady Hamilton. She feigned shyness, then haughtiness, then anger; then she ran. They were after her and about her in an instant. There were cries of "A kiss!" "A kiss!" "This way!" "Make a circle or she'll escape us!"

A dozen kisses so were stolen by the eager gallants before my lady broke away, stamping her foot in indignation, as she exclaimed:

"Nay, I am very angry, very—"

"That there were no more, wench!" laughed Buckingham. "Marry, 'tis a merry night when Portsmouth reigns. Long live the Duchess in the King's heart!"

"So you may capture its fairer favourite, friend Buckingham?" suggested the King, softly; and there was no hidden meaning in his speech, for the King suspected that Buckingham's heart as well was not at Portsmouth's and Buckingham knew that the King suspected it.

Buckingham was the prince of courtiers; he bowed low and, saying much without saying anything, replied respectfully:

"So I may console her, Sire, that she is out-beautied by France to-night."

"Out-beautied! Not bidden, thou mean'st," exclaimed the King, his thoughts roving toward Nelly's terrace. Ah, how he longed to be there! "The room is close," he fretted. "Come, gallants, to the promenade!"

He was dressed in white and gold; and

a princely prince he looked, indeed, as the courtiers separated for him to pass out between them.

All followed save Buckingham, whom Portsmouth's eye detained.

She broke into a joyous laugh as she turned from the tapestry-curtains, through which she could see his Majesty — the centre of a mirthful scene without.

"What say you now, my lord?" she asked, triumphantly, of Buckingham. "I am half avenged already, and the articles half signed. The King is here despite his Madame Gwyn, and in a playful mood that may be tuned to love."

Buckingham's ardour did not kindle as she hoped.

"Merriment is oft but Sadness's mask, Louise," he replied, thoughtfully.

"What meanest thou?" she asked, in her nervous, Gallic way, and as quickly, her mind anticipating, answered: "This trifle of the gossips that Charles advances the player's whim to found a hospital at Chelsea, for broken-down old soldiers? *Ce n'est rien!*"

She broke into a mocking laugh.

"Aye!" replied Buckingham, quietly but significantly. "The orders are issued for its building and the people are cheering Nell throughout the realm."

"*Ma foi!*" came from the Duchess's contemptuous lips. "And what say the rabble of Portsmouth?"

"That she is Louis's pensioner sent here from France—a spy!" he answered, quickly and forcefully too. "The hawkers cry it in the streets."

"Fools! Fools!" she mused. Then, making sure that no arras had ears, she continued: "Before the night is done, thou shalt hear that Luxembourg has fallen to the French—Mark!—Luxembourg! Feed the rabble on that, my lord. Heaven preserve King Louis!"

The Duke started incredulously. When had Portsmouth seen the King? and by what arts had she won the royal consent? A score of questions trembled on his lips—and yet were checked before the utterance. Not an intimation before of her success had reached his ear, though he had

advised with the Duchess almost daily since their accidental meeting below Nell's terrace. Indeed, in his heart, he had never believed that she would be able so to dupe the King. The shadow from the axe which fell upon Charles I. still cast its warning gloom athwart the walls of Whitehall; and, in the face of the temper of the English people and of well-known treaties, the acquiescence of Charles II. in Louis's project would be but madness. Luxembourg was the key strategetically to the Netherlands and the states beyond. Its fall meant the augmentation of the Empire of Louis, the personal ignominy of Charles!

"Luxembourg!" He repeated the word cautiously. "King Charles did not consent—"

"Nay," replied the Duchess, in her sweetest way, "but I knew he would; and so I sent the message in advance."

"Forgery! 'T was boldly done, Louise," cried Buckingham, in tones of admiration mixed with fear.

"I knew my power, my lord," she said

confidently; and her eyes glistened with womanly pride as she added: "The consent will come."

Buckingham's eyes—usually so frank—fell; and, for some seconds, he stood seemingly lost in abstraction over the revelations made by the Duchess. He was, however, playing a deeper game than he appeared to play. Apparently in thoughtlessness, he began to toy with a ring which hung upon a ribbon about his neck and which till then had been cautiously concealed.

"Nay, what have you there?" questioned Portsmouth.

Buckingham's face assumed an expression of surprise. He pretended not to comprehend the import of her words.

She pointed to the ring.

He glanced at it as though he regretted it had been seen, then added carelessly, apparently to appease but really to whet the Duchess's curiosity:

"Merely a ring the King gave Nell."

There was more than curiosity now in Portsmouth's eyes.

"I borrowed it to show it you," continued Buckingham, indifferently, then asked, with tantalizing calmness: "Is your mission quite complete?"

With difficulty, the Duchess mastered herself. Without replying, she walked slowly toward the table, in troubled thought. The mask of crime revealed itself in her beautiful features, as she said, half to herself:

"I have a potion I brought from France."

She was of the Latin race and poison was a heritage.

Buckingham caught the words not meant for him, and realized too well their sinister meaning. Poison Nell! His eyes swept the room fearfully and he shuddered. He hastened to Portsmouth's side, and in cold whispers importuned her:

"For Heaven's mercy, woman, as you love yourself and me—poison is an unhealthy diet to administer in England."

The Duchess turned upon him impatiently. The black lines faded slowly from

her face; but they still were there, beneath the beauty-lines.

"My servants have watched her house without avail," she sneered. "Your plan is useless; my plan will work."

"Stay!" pleaded Buckingham, still fearful. "We can ourselves entice some adventurous spirit up Nell's terrace, then trap him. So our end is reached."

"Aye," replied the Duchess, in milder mood, realizing that she had been overhasty at least in speech, "the minx presumes to love the King, and so is honest! But of her later. The treaties! He shall sign to-night—to-night, I say."

With a triumphant air, she pointed to the quills and sand upon a table in readiness for his signing.

Buckingham smiled approvingly; and in his smile lurked flattery so adroit that it pleased the Duchess despite herself.

"Lord Hyde, St. Albans and the rest," said he, "are here to aid the cause."

"Bah!" answered Portsmouth, with a shrug. "In the field, men; at court, women! This girl has outwitted you all.

I must accomplish my mission alone. Charles must be Louis's pensioner in full; England the slave of France! My fortune—*Le Grand Roi's* regard—hang upon it."

Buckingham cautioned her with a startled gesture.

"Nay," smiled Portsmouth, complacently, "I may speak frankly, my lord; for your head is on the same block still with mine."

"And my heart, Louise," he said, in admiration. "Back to the King! Do nothing rash. We will banish thy rival, dear hostess."

He did not add, save in thought, that Nell's banishment, if left to him, would be to his own country estate.

There was almost a touch of affection in the Duchess's voice as she prepared to join the King.

"Leave all to me, my lord," she said, then courtesied low.

"Yea, all but Nell!" reflected his lordship, as he watched her depart. "With this ring, I'll keep thee wedded to jeal-

ous interest, and so enrich my purse and power. Thou art a great woman, fair France; I half love thee myself. But thou knowest only a moiety of my purpose. The other half is Nell!"

He stood absorbed in his own thoughts.

The draperies at the further door-way, on which was worked in Gobelin tapestry a forest with its grand, imposing oaks, were pushed nervously aside. Jack Hart entered, mask in hand, and scanned the room with skeptic eye.

"A happy meeting," mused Buckingham, reflecting upon Hart's one-time ardour for Mistress Nell and upon the possibility that that ardour, if directed by himself, might yet compromise Nell in the King's eyes and lead to the realization of his own fond dreams of greater wealth and power and, still more sweet, to the possession of his choice among all the beauties of the realm.

"It is a sad hour," thought Hart, glancing at the merry dancers through the arch, "when all the world, like players, wear masks."

Buckingham assumed an air of bonhomie.

"Whither away, Master Hart?" he called after the player, who started perceptibly at his voice. "Let not thy fancy play truant to this gay assemblage, to mope in St. James's Park."

"My lord!" exclaimed Hart, hotly. The fire, however, was gone in an instant; and he added, evidently under strong constraint: "Pardon; but we prefer to change the subject."

"The drift's the same," chuckled the shrewd Buckingham; "we may turn it to advantage." He approached the player in a friendly manner. "Be not angry," he exclaimed soothingly; "for there's a rift even in the clouds of love. Brighter, man; for King Charles was seeking your wits but now."

"He'd have me play court-fool for him?" asked the melancholy mime, who had in his nature somewhat of the cynicism of Jaques, without his grand imaginings of soul. "There are many off the stage, my lord, in better practice."

"True, most true," acquiesced Buckingham; "I could point them out."

He would have continued in this vein but beyond the door, whence Hart had just appeared, leading by a stair-way of cupids to the entrance to the palace, arose the sound of many voices in noisy altercation.

"Hark ye, hark!" he exclaimed, in an alarmed tone. "What is't? Confusion in the great hall-way below. We 'll see to 't."

He had assumed a certain supervision of the palace for the night. With the player as a body-guard, he accordingly made a hasty exit.

CHAPTER XII

Beau Adair is my name.

THE room was not long vacant. The hostess herself returned. She was radiant.

As she crossed the threshold, she glanced back proudly at the revellers, who, led by his Majesty, were turning night into day with their merry-making. She had the right, indeed, to be proud; for the evening, though scarce half spent, bespoke a complete triumph for her entertainment. This was the more gratifying too, in that she knew that there were many at court who did not wish the "imported" Duchess, as they called her, or her function well, though they always smiled sweetly at each meeting and at each parting and deigned now to feast beyond the limit of gentility upon her rich wines and collations.

The *bal masqué*, however, as we have seen, was with the Duchess but a means

to an end. She took from the hand of a pretty page the treaties, lately re-drawn by Bouillon, and glanced hastily over the parchments to see that her instructions from Louis were covered by their words. A smile played on her arching lips as she read and re-read and realized how near she was to victory.

"'Tis Portsmouth's night to-night!" she mused. "My great mission to England is nearly ended. Dear France, I feel that I was born for thy advancement."

She seated herself by the table, where the materials for writing had been placed, and further dwelt upon the outcome of the royal agreements, their contingencies and triumphs. She could write Charles Rex almost as well as the King, she thought, as her eye caught the places left for his signature.

"Bouillon never fails me," she muttered. "Drawn by King Charles's consent, except perchance some trifling articles which I have had interlined for Louis's sake. We need not speak of them. It would be troublesome to Charles. A

little name and seal will make these papers history."

Her reflections were interrupted by the return of Buckingham, who was laughing so that he could scarcely speak.

"What is 't?" she asked, petulantly.

"The guard have stayed but now a gallant, Irish youth," replied he, as best he could for laughter, "who swore that he had letters to your highness. Oh, he swore, indeed; then pleaded; then threatened that he would fight them all with single hand. Of course, he won the ladies' hearts, as they entered the great hall, by his boyish swagger; but not the guards. Your orders were imperative — that none unbidden to the ball could enter."

"'T is well," cried Portsmouth. "None, none! Letters to me! Did he say from whom?"

"He said," continued Buckingham, still laughing, "that he was under orders of his master to place them only in the Duchess's hands. Oh, he is a very lordly youth."

The Duke throughout made a sad

attempt at amusing imitations of the brogue of the strange, youthful, Irish visitor who, with so much importunity, sought a hearing.

Portsmouth reflected a moment and then said: "I will see him, Buckingham, but briefly."

Buckingham, not a little surprised, bowed and departed graciously to convey the bidding.

The Duchess lost herself again in thought. "His message may have import," she reflected. "Louis sends strange messengers ofttimes."

In the midst of her reverie, the tapestry at the door was again pushed back, cautiously this time, then eagerly. There entered the prettiest spark that ever graced a kingdom or trod a measure.

It was Nell, accoutred as a youth; and a bold play truly she was making. Her face revealed that she herself was none too sure of the outcome.

"By my troth," she thought, as she glanced uncomfortably about the great room, "I feel as though I were all

breeches." She shivered. "It is such a little way through these braveries to me."

Her eyes turned involuntarily to the corner where Portsmouth sat, now dreaming of far-off France.

"The Duchess!" her lips breathed, almost aloud, in her excitement. "So you'd play hostess to his Majesty," she thought, "give a royal ball and leave poor Nelly home, would you?"

The Duchess was conscious only of a presence.

"*Garçon!*" she called, without looking up.

Nell jumped a foot.

"That shook me to the boots," she ejaculated, softly.

"*Garçon!*" again called the impatient Duchess.

"Madame," answered Nell, fearfully, the words seeming to stick in her fair throat, as she hastily removed her hat and bethought her that she must have a care or she would lose her head as well, by forgetting that she was an Irishman with a brogue.

"Who are you?" asked Portsmouth, haughtily, as, rising, with surprised eyes, she became aware of the presence of a stranger.

Indeed, it is not strange that she was surprised. The youth who stood before her was dressed from top to toe in gray — the silver-gray which lends a colour to the cheek and piquancy to the form. The dress was of the latest cut. The hat had the longest plume. The cloak hung gracefully save where the glistening sword broke its falling lines. The boots were neat, well rounded and well cut, encasing a jaunty leg. The dress was edged with silver.

Ah, the strange youth was a love, indeed, with his bright, sparkling eyes, his lips radiant with smiles, his curls falling to his shoulders.

"Well," stammered Nell, in awkward hesitation but in the richest brogue, as the Duchess repeated her inquiry, "I'm just I, madame."

The Duchess smiled despite herself.

"You're just you," she said. "That's very clear."

"Yes, that's very clear," reiterated Nell, still fearful of her ground.

"A modest masker, possibly," suggested Portsmouth, observing the youth's embarrassment and wishing to assist him.

"Yea, very modest," replied Nell, her speech still stumbling, "almost ashamed."

Portsmouth's eyes looked sharply at her.

"She suspects me," thought Nell, and her heart leaped into her throat. "I am lost—boots and all."

"Your name?" demanded the Duchess again, impatiently.

For the life of her Nell could not think of it.

"You see," she replied evasively, "I'm in London for the first time in my present self, madame, and—"

"Your name and mission, sir?" The tone was imperative.

Nell's wits returned to her.

"Beau Adair is my name," she stammered, "and your service my mission."

It was out, though it had like to have choked her, and Nell was more herself

again. The worst she had feared was that the Duchess might discover her identity and so turn the tables and make her the laughing-stock at court. She grew, indeed, quite hopeful as she observed a kindly smile play upon the Duchess's lips and caught the observation: "Beau Adair! A pretty name, and quite a pretty fellow."

A smile of self-satisfaction and a low bow were Nell's reply.

"Vain coxcomb!" cried Portsmouth, reprovingly, though she was highly amused and even pleased with the strange youth's conceit.

"Nay; if I admire not myself," wistfully suggested Nell, in reply, with pretence of much modesty, "who will praise poor me in this great palace?"

"You are new at court?" asked Portsmouth, doubtingly.

"Quite new," asserted Nell, gaining confidence with each speech. "My London tailor made a man of me only to-day."

"A man of you only to-day!" cried the Duchess, in wonderment.

"He assured me, madame," Nell hast-

ened to explain, "that the fashion makes the man. He did not like my former fashion. It hid too much that was good, he said. I am the bearer of this letter to the great Duchess of Portsmouth; that you are she, I know by your royalty."

She bowed with a jaunty, boyish bow, sweeping the floor with her plumed hat, as she offered the letter.

"Oh, you are the gentleman," said Portsmouth, recalling her request to Buckingham, which for the instant had quite escaped her. She took the letter and broke the seal eagerly.

"She does not suspect," thought Nell; and she crossed quickly to the curtained arch, leading to the music and the dancing, in the hope that she might see the King.

Portsmouth, who was absorbed in the letter, did not observe her.

"From Rochet! Dear Rochet!" mused the Duchess, as she read aloud the lines: "'The bearer of this letter is a young gallant, very modest and very little versed in the sins of court.'"

"Very little," muttered Nell, with a mischievous wink, still intent upon the whereabouts and doings of the King.

"'He is of excellent birth,'" continued the Duchess, reading, "'brave, young and to be trusted—*to be trusted.* I commend him to your kindness, protection and service, during his stay in town.'"

She reflected a moment intently upon the letter, then looked up quickly. Nell returned, somewhat confused, to her side.

"This is a very strong letter, sir," said Portsmouth, with an inquiring look.

"Yes, very strong," promptly acquiesced Nell; and she chuckled as she recalled that she had written it herself, taking near a fortnight in the composition. Her fingers ached at the memory.

"Where did you leave Rochet?" inquired the Duchess, almost incredulously.

"Leave Rochet?" thought Nell, aghast. "I knew she would ask me something like that."

There was a moment's awkwardness—Nell was on difficult ground. She feared lest she might make a misstep which

would reveal her identity. The Duchess grew impatient. Finally, Nell mustered courage and made a bold play for it, as ever true to her brogue.

"Where did I leave Rochet?" she said, as if she had but then realized the Duchess's meaning, then boldly answered: "In Cork."

"In Cork!" cried Portsmouth, in blank surprise. "I thought his mission took him to Dublin." She eyed the youth closely and wondered if he really knew the mission.

"Nay; Cork!" firmly repeated Nell; for she dared not retract, lest she awaken suspicion. "I am quite sure it was Cork I left him in."

"Quite sure?" exclaimed the Duchess, her astonishment increasing with each confused reply.

"Well, you see, Duchess," said Nell, "we had an adventure. It was dark; and we were more solicitous to know whither the way than whence."

The Duchess broke into a merry laugh. The youth had captured her, with his

wistful, Irish eyes, his brogue and his roguish ways.

"We give a ball to-night," she said, gaily. "You shall stay and see the King."

"The King!" cried Nell, feigning fright. "I should tremble so to see the King."

"You need not fear," laughed the hostess. "He will not know you."

"I trust not, truly," sighed Nell, with much meaning, as she scanned her scanty masculine attire.

"Take my mask," said the Duchess, graciously. "As hostess, I cannot wear it."

Nell seized it eagerly. She would be safe with this little band of black across her eyes. Even the King would not know her.

"I shall feel more comfortable behind this," she said, naïvely.

"Did you ever mask?" inquired Portsmouth, gaily.

"Nay, I am too honest to deceive," answered Nell; and her eyes grew so round and so big, who would not believe her?

"But you are at court now," laughed the Duchess, patronizingly. "Masking is the first sin at court."

"Then I'll begin with the first sin," said Nell, slyly, raising the Duchess's fingers to her lips, "and run the gamut."

They passed together into the great ball-room, Nell exercising all her arts of fascination — and they were many. The music ceased as they entered. The dancers, and more especially the ladies, eyed curiously the jaunty figure of the new-comer. There were merry whisperings among them.

"Who can he be?" asked one, eagerly. "What a pretty fellow!" exclaimed a second, in admiration. "I've been eying him," said a third, complacently.

The men too caught the infection.

"Who can he be?" inquired Rochester.

"Marry, I'll find out," said Lady Hamilton, with an air of confidence, having recovered by this time from the kisses which had been thrust upon her and being now ready for a new flirtation.

She approached Adair, artfully, and

inquired: "Who art thou, my butterfly? Tell me now, e'er I die." Her attitude was a credit to the extremes of euphuism.

There was general laughter at her presumptuous and effete pose and phrase.

The ladies had gathered about the new hero, like bees about new clover. The gallants stood, or sat as wall-flowers in a row, deserted. The King too had been abandoned for the lion of the hour and sat disconsolate.

"Peace, jealous ones!" cried Lady Hamilton, reprovingly, then continued, with a winning way: "I know thou art Apollo himself, good sir."

Nell smiled complacently, though she felt her mask, to assure herself that it was firm.

"Apollo, truly," she said, jauntily, "if thou art his lyre, sweet lady."

Lady Hamilton turned to the Duchess.

"Oh, your grace," she asked, languishingly, "tell us in a breath, tell us, who is this dainty beau of the ball?"

"How am I to know my guests," answered Portsmouth, feigning innocence,

"with their vizors down? Nay, sweet sir, unmask and please the ladies. I' faith, who art thou?"

The hostess was delighted. The popularity of the new-comer was lending a unique novelty to her entertainment. She was well pleased that she had detained Monsieur Adair. She thought she saw a jealous look in the King's usually carelessly indifferent gaze when she encouraged the affectionate glances of the Irish youth.

"I' faith," laughed Nell, in reply, "I know not, Duchess."

"D'ye hear?" said Portsmouth. "He knows not himself."

"But I have a suspicion, Duchess," sighed Nell.

"Hark ye," laughed Portsmouth, with a very pretty pout, "he has a suspicion, ladies."

"Nay, you will tell?" protested Nell, as the ladies gathered closer about her in eager expectation.

There was a unison of voices to the contrary.

"Trust us, fair sir," said one. "Oh, we are good at keeping secrets."

"Then, 'twixt you and me, I am—" began Nell; and she hesitated, teasingly.

The group about grew more eager, more wild with curiosity.

"Yes, yes—" they exclaimed together.

"I am," said Nell, "the Pied Piper of Hamlin Town."

"The rat-catcher," cried Portsmouth. "Oh, oh, oh!"

There was a lifting of skirts, revealing many high-born insteps, and a scramble for chairs, as the ladies reflected upon the long lines of rats in the train of the mesmeric Pied Piper.

"Flee, flee!" screamed Lady Hamilton, playfully. "He may pipe us into the mountains after the children."

"You fill me with laughter, ladies," said Portsmouth to her guests. "The man does not live who can entrap me."

"The woman does," thought Nell, as, mock-heroically, she placed near her lips a reed-pipe which she had snatched from a musician in the midst of the fun; and,

whistling a merry tune which the pipe took no part in, she circled about the room, making quite a wizard's exit.

The ladies, heart and soul in the fun, fell into line and followed, as if spell-bound by the magic of the Piper.

Charles, James, Rochester and the gallants, who remained, each of whom had been in turn deserted by his fair lady, unmasked and looked at one another in wonderment. Of one accord, they burst into a peal of laughter.

"Sublime audacity," exclaimed Charles. "Who is this curled darling—this ball-room Adonis? Ods-pitikins, we are in the sear and yellow leaf."

"Truly, Sire," said James, dryly, "I myself prefer a gathering of men only."

"Brother James," forthwith importuned the King, waggishly, "will you favour me with your lily-white hand for the next dance? I am driven to extremity."

"Pardon, Sire," replied James, quite humorously for him, "I am engaged to a handsomer man."

"Odsfish," laughed Charles, "King

Charles of England a wall-flower. Come, Rochester, my epitaph."

The King threw himself into a chair, in an attitude of hopeless resignation, quite delicious.

Rochester perked up with the conceit and humour of the situation. With the utmost dignity, and with the quizzical, pinched brow of the labouring muse, halting at each line, he said:

"*Here lies our sovereign lord, the King,*
Whose word no man relies on;
Who never said a foolish thing,
And never did a wise one!"

The post-mortem verse was sufficiently subtle and clever to revive the King's drooping spirits; and he joined heartily in the applause.

"The matter," he said, approvingly, "is easily accounted for — my discourse is my own, my actions are my Ministry's."

There was a *frou-frou* of petticoats. The hostess entered gaily.

"The King! The courtiers! Unmasked!" she exclaimed, in coy reproof.

"Fy, fy, your Majesty! For shame! Gallants! Are you children that I must pair you off?"

"We are seeking consolation," suggested Charles, dryly; "for modest souls have small chance to-night, Louise."

He nodded significantly in the direction of the great ball-room, where the chatter of women's voices betokened the unrivalled popularity of Nell.

"When did you turn modest, Sire?" slyly inquired Portsmouth, with a look of love.

"When I was out-stripped in audacity by yon Hibernian youth," replied the King, seriously. "Who is this peacock you are introducing?"

A peal of laughter from without punctuated the King's speech. It was the reward of a wit-thrust from Nell.

"The Piper the maids would now unmask?" queried Portsmouth, rapturously. "Marry, 'tis the fascinating Beau Adair of Cork, entertaining the ladies. Oh, he is a love, Sire; he does not sulk in corners. See! See!"

She pointed toward the archway, through which Nell was plainly visible. She was strutting jauntily back and forth upon the promenade. It is unnecessary to say that she was escorted by the assembled fair ones.

As Nell caught the eye of the hostess in the distance, she gaily tossed a kiss to her.

"'Sdeath, that I were a woman to hope for one of his languishing smiles," observed Buckingham.

"Even the old hens run at his call," sneered the pious James, in discontent; for he too had been deserted by his lady-love and even before the others.

The King looked at his brother with an air of bantering seriousness, to the delight of all assembled.

"Brother James is jealous of the old ones only," he observed. "You know his favourites are given him by his priests for penance."

A merry ripple ran through the group.

The hostess took advantage of the King's speech to make a point.

"And you are jealous of the young ones only," she said, slyly, quickly adding as a bid for jealousy: "Pooh, pooh! *Le Beau* had letters to me, Sire. Nay, we do not love him very much. We have not as yet had time."

"Alas, alas," sighed Charles, with drooping countenance, "that it should come to this."

"My liege, I protest—" cried Portsmouth, hastily, fearful lest she might have gone too far. "To-night is the first I ever saw the youth. I adore you, Sire."

"Not a word!" commanded Charles, with mock-heroic mien. He waved his hand imperatively to his followers. "Friends," he continued, "we will mix masks and dominoes and to't again to drown our sorrow."

"In the Thames?" inquired James, facetiously for him.

"Tush! In the punch-bowl, pious brother!" protested the Merry Monarch, with great dignity. "You know, a very little water will drown even a king."

The gallants mixed masks and domi-

noes in obedience to the royal wish. The King, sighing deeply, cast a hopeless glance at Portsmouth, not without its tinge of humour. He then sauntered slowly toward the windows of the great ball-room, followed subserviently by all the courtiers, save Buckingham, who was lost in converse with player Hart.

"Hark ye," suddenly broke off Buckingham, observing the approach of Adair and his adorers, "here come again the merry maskers. By Bacchus, the little bantam still reigns supreme. The King and his gallants in tears. Let us join the mourners, Master Hart."

As the Duke and the player, the former assuming a fraternal air for an end of his own, joined the royal group, Nell re-entered gaily, every inch the man. She was still surrounded by the ladies, who, fluttering, flattering and chattering, hung upon her every word. With one hand she toyed with her mask, which she had good-naturedly dropped as none were about who knew her. She clapped it, however, quickly to her eyes at sight of the King.

"You overwhelm me, my fair ones," she said, with spirit, as she held court in the centre of the room. "I assure you, I am not used to such attention—from the ladies."

"Our hospitality is beggarly to your deserts," sighed Portsmouth, who had joined the bevy, but loud enough for the King to hear.

"You quite o'erpower me, Duchess," answered Nell, modestly, adding for the satisfaction of her own sense of humour: "No wonder we men are fools, if you women talk like this."

While she was speaking, Lady Hamilton whispered facetiously in Portsmouth's ear.

"Beau Adair married!" exclaimed the Duchess, in response. "It cannot be. He looks too gay for a married man."

"No confidences, my pretty ones," observed Nell, reprovingly.

The hostess hesitated; then she out with it in a merry strain.

"Lady Hamilton asks after the wife you left at home."

"My wife!" cried Nell, in astonishment; for this phase of her masquerading had not presented itself to her before. "Great Heavens, I have no wife—I assure you, ladies!"

"So?" observed Portsmouth, her curiosity awakened. "Modest—for a bachelor."

"A bachelor!" exclaimed Nell, now fully *en rapport* with the spirit of the situation. "Well,—not exactly a bachelor either,—ladies."

"Alack-a-day," sighed Lady Hamilton, with a knowing glance at her companions, "neither a bachelor nor a married man!"

"Well, you see—" explained Nell, adroitly, "that might seem a trifle queer, but—I'm in mourning—deeply in mourning, ladies."

She drew a kerchief from her dress and feigned bitter tears.

"A widower!" tittered Lady Hamilton, heartlessly. "Our united congratulations, sir."

The other ladies one by one sobbed

with affected sympathy, wiping their eyes tenderly, however, lest they might remove the rich colour from their cheeks.

"Mesdames," said Nell, reprovingly, "the memory is sacred. Believe me, very sacred."

She fell apparently once again to weeping bitterly.

"The memory is always sacred—with men," observed Portsmouth, for the benefit of her guests, not excepting the Irish youth. "Nay, tell us the name of the fair one who left you so young. My heart goes out to you, dear Beau."

"Kind hostess," replied Nell, assuming her tenderest tones, "the name of my departed self is—Nell!"

Hart caught the word. The player was standing near, reflecting on the scene and on the honeyed words of the Duke of Buckingham, who was preparing the way that he might use him.

"Nell!" he muttered. "Who spoke that name?"

The hostess too was startled.

"Nell!" she exclaimed, with contend-

ing emotions. "Strange! Another cavalier who graces *mon bal masqué* to-night has lost a loved one whose name is Nell. Ah, but she was unworthy of his noble love."

She spoke pointedly at the masked King, who started perceptibly.

"Yes," he thought; for his conscience smote him, "unworthy — he of her."

"Unworthy, truly, if he dances so soon and his own Nell dead," added Nell, reflectively, but so that all might hear, more especially Charles.

"Perchance Nell too thinks so," thought he, as he restlessly walked away, sighing: "I wish I were with her on the terrace."

"'Sdeath, Duchess," continued Nell abruptly, in assumed horror at the sudden thought, "the lady's spirit may visit the ball, to the confusion of us all. Such things have been."

"The Nell I mean," said Portsmouth, with a confident smile, "will not venture here, e'en in spirit."

Nell assumed a baby-innocence of face.

"She has not been bidden, I presume?" she queried.

"The vixen would not stop for asking," declared Portsmouth, almost fiercely.

"Come without asking?" cried Nell, as if she could not believe that there could be such people upon the earth. "How ill-bred! Thine ear, loved one. My Nell revisits the world again at midnight. The rendezvous—St. James's Park."

Hart brushed close enough to the group, in his biting curiosity, to catch her half-whisper to Portsmouth. He at once sought a window and fresh air, chafing with surprise and indignation at what he had overheard.

"St. James's at midnight," he muttered. "'T is my Nell's abode."

The Duchess herself stood stunned at what appeared to her a possible revelation of great import.

"St. James's!" she thought. "Can he mean Madame Gwyn? No, no!"

The look of suspicion which for an instant had clouded her face changed to one of merriment, under Adair's magic glance.

"And you would desert me for such a fleshless sprite?" she asked.

"Not so," said Nell, with a winning look; "but, when my better-half returns to life, I surely cannot refuse an interview —especially an she come from afar."

Nell's eyes arose with an expression of sadness, while her finger pointed downward in the direction of what she deemed the probable abode of her departed "Nell." Her lips twitched in merriment, however, despite her efforts to the contrary; and the hostess fell a-laughing.

"Ladies," she cried, as she appealed to one and all, "is not *le Beau* a delight— so different from ordinary men?"

"I am not an ordinary man, I assure you," Nell hastened to declare.

This assertion was acquiesced in by a buzz of pretty compliments from the entire bevy of ladies. "Positively charming!" exclaimed one. "A perfect love!" said another.

Nell listened resignedly.

"'Sheart," she said, at length, with an air of *ennui*, "I cannot help it. 'Tis all

part of being a man, you know."

"Would that all men were like you, *le Beau!*" sighed the hostess, not forgetting to glance at the King, who again sat disconsolate, in the midst of his attendant courtiers, drawn up, as in line of battle, against the wall.

"Heaven help us if they were!" slyly suggested Nell.

Rochester, who had been watching the scene in his mischievous, artistic way, drew from Portsmouth's compliment to Adair another meaning. He was a mixture 'twixt a man of arts and letters and Satan's own — a man after the King's own heart. Turning to the King, with no desire to appease the mischief done, he said, banteringly:

"Egad, there's a rap at you, Sire. France would make you jealous."

The Duke of Buckingham too, though he appeared asleep, had seen it all.

"And succeeds, methinks," he reflected, glancing approvingly in the direction of the Irish youth. "A good ally, i' faith."

Nell, indeed, was using all her arts of fascination to ingratiate herself with the Duchess, and making progress, too.

"Your eyes are glorious, fair hostess," she said, in her most gallant love-tones, "did I not see my rival in them."

She could not, however, look at Portsmouth for laughter, as she thought: "I believe lying goes with the breeches; I never was so proficient before."

The compliment aroused the King's sluggish nature.

"I can endure no more, gallants," cried he, with some pretence of anger, rising abruptly, followed, of course, in each move and grimace by his courtier-apes, in their desire to please. "Are we to be out-done in our own realm by this usurper with a brogue? Ha! The fiddlers! Madame, I claim the honour of this fair hand for the dance."

At the sound of the music, he had stepped gallantly forward, taking the hostess's hand.

"My thanks, gallant masker," replied the Duchess, pretending not to know

him for flattery's sake, "but I am—"

To her surprise, she had no opportunity to complete the sentence.

"Engaged! Engaged!" interposed Nell, coming unceremoniously between them, with swaggering assumption and an eye-shot at the King through the portal of her mask. "Forsooth, some other time, strange sir."

The hostess stood horrified.

"Pardon, Sir Masker," she hastened to explain; "but the dance was pledged—"

"No apologies, Duchess," replied the King, as he turned away, carelessly, with the reflection: "All's one to me at this assemblage."

He crossed the room, turning an instant to look, with a humorous, quizzical glance, at Portsmouth. Nell mistook the glance for a jealous one and, perking up quickly, caught the royal eye with a challenging eye, tapping her sword-hilt meaningly. Had the masks been off, the situation would have differed. As it was, the King smiled indifferently. The episode did not affect him further than to touch his sense

of humour. Nell turned triumphantly to her partner.

"Odsbud," she exclaimed, with a delicious, youthful swagger, "we may have to measure swords in your behalf, dear hostess. I trow the fellow loves you."

"Have a care," whispered the Duchess, nervously. "It is the King."

"What care I for a king?" saucily replied Nell, with a finger-snap. She had taken good care, however, to speak very low. "My arm, my arm, Duchess!" she continued, with a gallant step. "Places, places; or the music will outstrip us."

"Strut on, my pretty bantam," thought Buckingham, whose eyes lost little that might be turned to his own advantage; "I like you well."

There was no mending things at this stage by an apology. The Duchess, therefore, tactfully turned the affair into one of mirth, in which she was quickly joined by her guests. With a merry laugh, she took the Irish gallant's proffered arm, and together they led the dance. The

King picked a lady indifferently from among the maskers.

It was a graceful old English measure. Nell's roguish wits, as well as her feet, kept pace with the music. She assured her partner that she had never loved a woman in all her life before and followed this with a hundred merry jests and sallies, keyed to the merry fiddles, so full of blarney that all were set a-laughing. Anon, the gallants drew their swords and crossed them in the air, while the ladies tiptoed in and out. Nell's blade touched the King's blade. When all was ended the swords saluted with a knightly flourish, then tapped the floor.

There was an exultant laugh from one and all, and the dance was done.

Nell hastened to her partner's side. She caught the Duchess's hand and kissed it.

"You dance divinely, your grace," she said. "A goddess on tiptoe."

"Oh, Beau Adair!" replied the Duchess, courtesying low; and her eyes showed that she was not wholly displeased at the warmth of his youthful adoration.

"Oh, Duchess!" said Nell, fondly, acknowledging the salute.

The Duchess hastened to join his Majesty and together they threaded their way through many groups.

Nell tossed her head.

"How I love her!" she muttered, veiling the sarcasm under her breath.

She crossed the great room, her head erect. Her confidence was quite restored. This had been the most difficult bit of acting she had ever done; and how well it had been done!

The other dancers in twos and threes passed from the room in search of quiet corners, in which to whisper nothings.

Nell's eyes fell upon Strings, who had had a slight turn for the better in the world and who now, in a dress of somewhat substantial green, was one of the fiddlers at the Duchess's ball.

"How now, sirrah!" she said, sharply, as she planted herself firmly before him to his complete surprise. "I knew you were here."

She placed one of her feet in a devil-

may-care fashion upon a convenient chair in manly contempt of its upholstery and peeped amusedly through her mask at her old friend. He looked at her in blank amazement.

"Gads-bobbs," he exclaimed, in confusion, "the Irish gentleman knows me!"

"There's nothing like your old fiddle, Strings," continued Nell, still playing with delight upon his consternation. "It fills me with forty dancing devils. If you were to play at my wake, I would pick up my shroud, and dance my way into Paradise."

"Your lordship has danced to my fiddling before?" he gasped, in utter amazement.

"Danced!" gleefully cried Nell. "I have followed your bow through a thousand jigs. To the devil with these courtsteps. I'm for a jig, jig, jig, jig, jig! Oh, I'm for a jig! Tune up, tune up, comrade; and we'll have a touch of the old days at the King's House."

"The King's House! Jigs!" exclaimed the fiddler, now beside himself.

"Jigs!" chuckled Nell. "Jigs are my line of business."

Oranges, will you have my oranges?

Sweet as love-lips, dearest mine,
Picked by Spanish maids divine,—

The room had now quite cleared; and, protected by a friendly alcove, Nell punctuated the old song with a few happily turned jig-steps. Strings looked at her a moment in bewilderment: then his face grew warm with smiles; the mystery was explained.

"Mistress Nell, as I live," he cried, joyously, "turned boy!"

"The devil fly away with you, you old idiot! Boy, indeed!" replied Nell, indignantly. "I'm a full-grown widower!"

She had removed her mask and was dancing about Strings gleefully.

There was the sound of returning voices.

"Oons, you will be discovered," exclaimed Strings, cautiously.

"Marry, I forgot," whispered Nell, glancing over her shoulder. "You may

have to help me out o' this scrape, Strings, before the night is done."

"You can count on me, Mistress Nell, with life," he replied, earnestly.

"I believe you!" said Nell, in her sympathetic, hearty way. Her mind reverted to the old days when Strings and she were at the King's. "Oh, for just one jig with no petticoats to hinder."

Nell, despite herself, had fallen into an old-time jig, with much gusto, for her heart was for a frolic always, when Strings seized her arm in consternation, pointing through the archway.

"The King!" she exclaimed.

She clapped her mask to her eyes and near tumbled through the nearest arras out of the room in her eagerness to escape, dragging her ever-faithful comrade with her.

CHAPTER XIII

For the glory of England?

THE King entered the room with his historic stride. His brow was clouded; but it was all humorous pretence, for trifles were not wont to weigh heavily upon his Majesty. With him came Portsmouth.

"Can you forgive me, Sire?" she asked. "I had promised the dance to Beau Adair. I did not know you, Sire; you masked so cleverly."

"'Sdeath, fair flatterer!" replied the King. "I have lived too long to worry o'er the freaks of women."

"The youth knew not to whom he spoke," still pleaded Portsmouth. "His introduction here bespeaks his pardon, Sire."

The King looked sardonic, but his laugh had a human ring.

"He is too pretty to kill," he declared, dramatically. "We'll forgive him

for your sake. And now good night."

"So soon?" asked Portsmouth, anxiously.

"It is late," he replied.

"Not while the King is here," she sighed. "Night comes only when he departs."

"Your words are sweet," said Charles, thoughtfully observing her.

She sighed again.

"My thoughts stumble in your speech," she said. "I regret I have not English blood within my veins."

"And why?"

"The King would trust and love me then. He does not now. I am French and powerless to do him good."

There was a touch of honest sadness in her speech which awakened the King's sympathy.

"Nay," he said hastily, to comfort her; "'t is thy fancy. Thy entertainment hath made me grateful — to Louis and Louise."

"Think not of Louis and Louise," she said, sadly and reproachfully, "but of thy dear self and England's glory. For shame!

Ah, Sire, my childhood-dreams were of sunny France, where I was born; at Versailles—at Fontainebleau among the monarch trees—my early womanhood sighed for love. France gave me all but that. It came not till I saw the English King!"

The siren of the Nile never looked more bewitchingly beautiful than this siren of France as she half reclined upon the couch, playing upon the King's heart with a bit of memory. His great nature realized her sorrow and encompassed it.

"And am I not good to thee, child?" he asked. He took her hand and responded to her eyes, though not with the tenderness of love—the tenderness for which she sought.

"You are good to none," she replied, bitterly; "for you are not good to Charles."

"You speak enigmas," he said, curious.

"Have you forgotten your promise?" she asked, naïvely.

"Nay; the passport, pretty one?" he answered, amused at the woman's wiles. "All this subterfuge of words for that!

There; rest in peace. Thy friend hath a path to France at will."

He smiled kindly as he took the passport from his girdle, handed it to her and turned to take his leave.

"My thanks are yours. Stay, Sire," she said, hastily; for her mission was not yet complete and the night was now well gone. "Passports are trifles. Will you not leave the Dutch to Louis and his army? Think!"

She placed her arms about his neck and looked enticingly into his eyes.

"But," he replied, kindly, "my people demand that I intervene and stay my brother Louis's aggressive hand."

"Are the people king?" she asked, with coy insinuation. "Do they know best for England's good? Nay, Sire, for your good and theirs, I beseech, no more royal sympathy for Holland. I speak to avoid entanglements for King Charles and to make his reign the greater. I love you, Sire." She fell upon her knee. "I speak for the glory of England."

His Majesty was influenced by her

beauty and her arts,—what man would not be?—but more by the sense of what she said.

"For the glory of England?" he asked himself. "True, my people are wrong. 'T is better we remain aloof. No wars!"

He took the seat by the table, which the Duchess offered him, and scanned casually the parchment which she handed to him.

Nell peered between the curtains. Strings was close behind her.

"Bouillon's signature for France," mused the King. "'T is well! No more sympathy for the Dutch, Louise, until Holland sends a beauty to our court to outshine France's ambassador."

He looked at Portsmouth, smiled and signed the instrument, which had been prepared, as he thought, in accordance with his wishes and directions. He then carelessly tossed the sand over the signature to blot it.

The fair Duchess's eyes revealed all the things which all the adjectives of all the lands ever meant.

"Holland may outshine in beauty, Sire," she said, kneeling by the King's side, "but not in sacrifice and love." She kissed his hand fervently.

He sat complacently looking into her eyes, scarce mindful of her insinuating arts of love. He was fascinated with her, it is true; but it was with her beauty, flattery and sophistry, not her heart.

"I believe thou dost love England and her people's good," he said, finally. "Thy words art wise."

Portsmouth leaned fondly over his shoulder.

"One more request," she said, with modest mien, "a very little one, Sire."

The King laughed buoyantly.

"Nay, an I stay here," he said, "thy beauty will win my kingdom! What is thy little wish, sweet sovereign?"

"No more Parliaments in England, Sire," she said, softly.

"What, woman!" he exclaimed, rising, half-aghast, half-humorous, at the suggestion; for he too had an opinion of Parliament.

"To cross the sway of thy great royal state-craft," she continued, quickly following up the advantage which her woman's wit taught her she had gained. "The people's sufferings from taxation spring from Parliament only, Sire."

"'T is true," agreed Charles, decisively.

Portsmouth half embraced him.

"For the people's good, Sire," she urged, "for my sweetest kiss."

"You are mad," said Charles, yet three-fourths convinced; "my people—"

"Will be richer for my kiss," the Duchess interrupted, wooingly, "and their King, by divine right and heritage, will rule untrammelled by country clowns, court knaves and foolish lords, who now make up a silly Parliament. With such a King, England will be better with no Parliament to hinder. Think, Sire, think!"

"I have thought of this before," said Charles, who had often found Parliament troublesome and, therefore, useless. "The taxes will be less and contention saved."

"Why hesitate then?" she asked. "This hour's as good for a good deed as any."

"For England's sake?" reflected Charles, inquiringly, as he took the second parchment from her hands. "Heaven direct my judgment for my people's good. I sign."

The treaties which Louis XIV. of France had sent the artful beauty to procure lay signed upon her desk.

Nell almost pulled the portières from their hangings in her excitement.

"I must see those papers," she thought. "There's no good brewing."

Portsmouth threw her arms about the King and kissed him passionately.

"Now, indeed, has England a great King," she said, adding to herself: "And that King Louis's slave!"

Charles smiled and took his leave. As he passed through the portal, he wiped his lips, good-humouredly muttering: "Portsmouth's kisses and Nell's do not mix well."

Portsmouth listened for a moment to his departing footsteps, then dropped into the chair by the table and hastily folded and addressed the papers.

Her mission was ended!

CHAPTER XIV

He loves me! He loves me!

NELL, half draped in the arras, had seen the kiss in reality bestowed by Portsmouth but as she thought bestowed by the King. As his Majesty departed through the door at the opposite end of the room, the colour came and went in her cheeks. She could scarce breathe.

Portsmouth sat unconscious of all but her own grand achievement. She had accomplished what shrewd statesmen had failed to bring about; and this would be appreciated, she well knew, by Louis.

"'Sdeath!" muttered Nell to herself, hotly, as, with quite a knightly bearing, she approached the Duchess. "He kisses her before my very eyes! He kisses her! I'll kill the minx!" She half unsheathed her blade. "Pshaw! No! No! I am too gallant to kill the sex. I'll do the very manly act and simply break her heart.

Aye, that is true bravery in breeches."

Her manner changed.

"Your grace!" she said suavely.

"Yes," answered Portsmouth, her eyes still gleaming triumphantly.

"It seems you are partial of your favours?"

"Yes."

"Such a gift from lips less fair," continued Nell, all in wooing vein, "would make a beggar royal."

The hostess was touched with the phrasing of the compliment. She smiled.

"You would be pleased to think me fair?" she coyly asked, with the air of one convinced that it could not well be otherwise.

"Fairer than yon false gallant thinks you," cried Nell, with an angry toss of the head in the direction of the departed King. "Charles's kiss upon her lips?" she thought. "'T is mine, and I will have it."

In the twinkling of an eye, she threw both arms wildly about the neck of the astonished hostess and kissed her forcefully upon the lips. Then, with a ringing

laugh, tinged with triumph, she stepped back, assuming a defiant air.

The Duchess paled with anger. She rose quickly and, turning on the pretty youth, exclaimed: "Sir, what do you mean?"

"Tilly-vally!" replied the naughty Nell, in her most winning way. "A frown upon that alabaster brow, a pout upon those rosy lips; and all for nothing!"

"*Parbleu!*" exclaimed the indignant Duchess. "Your impudence is outrageous, sir! We will dispense with your company. Good night!"

"Ods-pitikins!" swaggered Nell, feigning umbrage. "Angry because I kissed you! You have no right, madame, to be angry."

"No right?" asked Portsmouth, her feelings tempered by surprise.

"No right," repeated Nell, firmly. "It is I who should be outraged at your anger."

"Explain, sir," said the Duchess, haughtily.

Nell stepped toward the lady, and, assuming her most tender tone, with wistful, loving eyes, declared:

"Because your grace can have no appreciation of what my temptation was to kiss you."

The Duchess's countenance glowed with delight, despite herself.

"I'faith, was there a temptation?" she asked, quite mollified.

"An overwhelming passion," cried Nell, following up her advantage.

"And you were disappointed, sir?" asked Portsmouth suggestively, her vanity falling captive to the sweet cajolery.

"I only got yon courtier's kiss," saucily pouted Nell, "so lately bestowed on you."

"Do you know whose kiss that was?" inquired the Duchess.

"It seemed familiar," answered Nell, dryly.

"The King's," said Portsmouth, proudly.

"The King's!" cried Nell, opening wide her eyes. "Take back your kiss. I would not have it."

"Indeed!" said Portsmouth, smiling.

"'Tis too volatile," charged Nell, de-

cisively. "'T is here, 't is there, 't is everywhere bestowed. Each rosy tavern-wench with a pretty ankle commands it halt. A kiss is the gift of God, the emblem of true love. Take back the King's kiss; I do not wish it."

"He does not love the King," thought Portsmouth, ever on the lookout for advantage. "A possible ally!"

She turned upon the youth, with humorous, mocking lip, and said reprovingly: "A kiss is a kiss the world over, fair sir; and the King's kisses are sacred to Portsmouth's lips."

"Zounds," replied Nell, with a wicked wink, "not two hours since, he bestowed a kiss on Eleanor Gwyn—"

"Nell Gwyn!" cried the Duchess, interrupting; and she started violently.

"With oaths, mountains high," continued Nell, with pleasurable harshness, "that his lips were only for her."

The Duchess stood speechless, quivering from top to toe.

Nell herself swaggered carelessly across the room, muttering mischievously, as

she watched the Duchess from the corner of her eye: "Methinks that speech went home."

"He kissed her in your presence?" gasped Portsmouth, anxiously following her.

"I was not far off, dear Duchess," was the quizzical reply.

"You saw the kiss?"

"No," answered Nell, dryly, and she could scarce contain her merriment. "I—I—felt the shock."

Before she had finished the sentence, the King appeared in the doorway. His troubled spirit had led him to return, to speak further with the Duchess regarding the purport of the treaties. He had the good of his people at heart, and he was not a little anxious in mind lest he had been over-hasty in signing such weighty articles without a more careful reading. He stopped short as he beheld, to his surprise, the Irish spark Adair in earnest converse with his hostess.

"I hate Nell Gwyn," he overheard the Duchess say.

"Is't possible?" interrogated Nell, with wondering eyes.

The King caught this utterance as well.

"In a passion over Nelly?" reflected he. "I'd sooner face Cromwell's soldiers at Boscobel! All hail the oak!"

His Majesty's eye saw with a welcome the spreading branches of the monarch of the forest, outlined on the tapestry; and, with a sigh of relief, he glided quickly behind it and, joining a group of maskers, passed into an anteroom, quite out of ear-shot.

"Most strange!" continued Nell, wonderingly. "Nell told me but yesterday that Portsmouth was charming company —but a small eater."

"'T is false," cried the Duchess, and her brow clouded at the unpleasant memory of the meeting at Ye Blue Boar. "I never met the swearing orange-wench."

"Ods-pitikins!" acquiesced Nell, woefully. "Nell's oaths are bad enough for men."

"Masculine creature!" spitefully ejaculated the Duchess.

"Verily, quite masculine—of late," said Nell, demurely, giving a significant tug at her boot-top.

"A vulgar player," continued the indignant Duchess, "loves every lover who wears gold lace and tosses coins."

"Nay; 'tis false!" denied Nell, sharply.

The Duchess looked up, surprised.

Nell was all obeisance in an instant.

"Pardon, dear hostess, a thousand pardons," she prayed; "but I have some reason to know you misjudge Mistress Nell. With all her myriad faults, she never loved but one."

"You seem solicitous for her good name, dear Beau?" suggested Portsmouth, suspiciously.

"I am solicitous for the name of all good women," promptly explained Nell, who was rarely caught a-napping, "or I would be unworthy of their sex—I mean their friendship."

The Duchess seemed satisfied with the explanation.

"Dear Beau, what do the cavaliers see in that horrid creature?" archly asked the

Duchess, contemptuous of this liking of the stronger sex.

"Alack-a-day, we men, you know," replied Nell, boastfully, "well—the best of us make mistakes in women."

"Are you mistaken?" questioned Portsmouth, coyly.

"What?" laughed Nell, in high amusement. "I love Nelly? Nay, Duchess," and her voice grew tender, "I adore but one!"

"And she?" asked the hostess, encouraging the youth's apparently awakening passion.

"How can you ask?" said Nell, with a deep sigh, looking adoringly into Portsmouth's eyes and almost embracing her.

"Do you not fear?" inquired Portsmouth, well pleased.

"Fear what?" questioned Nell.

"My wrath," said Portsmouth.

"Nay, more, thy love!" sighed Nell, meaningly, assuming a true lover's dejected visage.

"My love!" cried Portsmouth, curiously.

"Aye," again sighed Nell, more deeply still; "for it is hopeless."

"Try," said the Duchess, almost resting her head upon Nell's shoulder.

"I am doing my best," said Nell, her eyes dancing through wistful lashes, as she embraced in earnest the Duchess's graceful figure and held it close.

"Do you find it hopeless?" asked Portsmouth, returning the embrace.

"Until you trust me," replied Nell, sadly. She shook her curls, then fondly pleaded: "Give me the secrets of your brain and heart, and then I'll know you love me."

The hostess smiled and withdrew from the embrace. Nell stood the picture of forlorn and hopeless love.

"Nay," laughed Portsmouth, consolingly, "they would sink a ship."

"One would not," still pleaded Nell, determined at all odds to have the packet.

"One!" The Duchess's eyes fell unconsciously upon the papers which she had bewitched from the King and which lay so near her heart. She started first with

fear; and then her countenance assumed a thoughtful cast.

There was no time now for delay. The papers must be sent immediately. The King might return and retract. Many a battle, she knew, had been lost after it had been won.

That night, at the Rainbow Tavern, well out of reach of the town, of court spies and gossips, Louis would have a trusted one in waiting. His commission was to receive news from various points and transmit it secretly to France. It was a ride of but a few hours to him.

She had purposed to send the packet by her messenger in waiting; but he had rendered her suspicious by his speech and action in the late afternoon, and she questioned whether she would be wise in trusting him. Nor was she willing to risk her triumph in the hands of Buckingham's courier. It was too dear to her.

Indeed, she was clever enough to know that state-secrets are often safer in the custody of a disinterested stranger than in the hands of a friend, especially if the stranger

be truly a stranger to the court.

She glanced quickly in the direction of Nell, who looked the ideal of daring youth, innocent, honest and true to the death.

"Why not?" she thought quickly, as she reflected again upon Rochet's words, "to be trusted." "Of Irish descent, no love for the King, young, brave, no court ties; none will suspect or stay him."

Her woman's intuition said "yes." She turned upon Nell and asked, not without agitation in her voice:

"Can I trust you?"

Nell's sword was out in an instant, glistening in the light, and so promptly that the Duchess started. Nell saluted, fell upon one knee and said, with all the exuberance of audacious, loving youth:

"My sword and life are yours."

Portsmouth looked deeply into Nell's honest eyes. She was convinced.

"This little packet," said she, in subdued tones, summoning Nell to her side, "a family matter merely, must reach the Rainbow Tavern, on the Canterbury

Road, by sunrise, where one is waiting. You 'll find his description on the packet."

Nell sheathed her sword.

"I know the place and road," she said, earnestly, as she took the papers from the Duchess's hand and placed them carefully in her doublet.

A rustle of the curtains indicated that some one had returned and was listening by the arras.

"Hush!" cautioned Portsmouth. "Be true, and you will win my love."

Nell did not reply, save to the glance that accompanied the words. Snatching her hat from a chair on which she had tossed it, she started eagerly in the direction of the great stairs that led to the hallway below, where, an hour since, she had been at first refused admission to the palace. Could she but pass again the guards, all would be well; and surely there was now no cause for her detention. Yet her heart beat tumultuously — faster even than when she presented herself with Rochet's letter written by herself.

As she was hastening by the arras,

her quick eye, however, recognized the King's long plume behind it; and she halted in her course. She was alert with a thousand maddening thoughts crowding her brain, all in an instant.

"The King returned—an eavesdropper!" she reflected. "Jealous of Portsmouth; his eyes follow her. Where are his vows to Nell? I'll defame Nell's name, drag her fair honour in the mire; so, Charles, we'll test your manliness and love."

She recrossed the room quickly to Portsmouth.

"Madame," she exclaimed, in crisp, nervous tones, loud enough for the King's ear, "I have been deceiving, lying to you. I stood here, praising, honouring Eleanor Gwyn—an apple rotten to the core!"

"How now?" ejaculated Charles, in an undertone.

His carelessness vanished upon the instant. Where he had waited for the single ear of Portsmouth, he became at once an earnest listener.

Nell paused not.

"I had a friend who told me he loved Nell. I loved that friend. God knows I loved him."

"Yes, yes!" urged Portsmouth, with eagerness.

"A man of noble name and princely mien," continued Nell, so standing that the words went, like arrows, straight to the King's ear and heart, "a man of honour, who would have died fighting for Nell's honour—"

"Misled youth," muttered Portsmouth.

Nell seemed not to hear the words.

"Who, had he heard a murmur of disapproval, a shadow cast upon her name, would have sealed in death the presumptuous lips which uttered it."

"She betrayed his confidence?" asked Portsmouth, breathlessly.

"Betrayed—and worse!" gesticulated Nell, with the visage of a madman. "A woman base, without a spark of kindliness—an adventuress! This is the picture of that Eleanor Gwyn! Where is a champion to take up the gauntlet for such a Nell?"

As quick as light, the King threw back the arras and came between them. The Duchess saw him and cried out in surprise. Nell did not turn — only caught a chair-top to save herself from falling.

"Here, thou defamer!" he called, his voice husky with passion. "Thou base purveyor of lies, answer me — me, for those words! I am Nell's champion! I'll force you to own your slander a lie."

The King was terribly in earnest.

"The guard! The guard!" called Portsmouth, faintly, almost overcome by the scene. In her passion that the King so revealed his love for Nell, she quite forgot that Adair was the bearer of her packet.

"I want no guard," commanded the King. "An insult to Nell Gwyn is my cause alone."

Nell was in an elysium of ecstasy. She realized nothing, saw nothing.

"He loves me! He loves me!" her trembling lips breathed only. "He'll fight for Nell."

"Come; draw and defend yourself," angrily cried the King.

Portsmouth screamed and fell upon his arm.

It is doubtful what the result would otherwise have been. True, Nell oft-times had fenced with the King and knew his wrist, but she was no swords-woman now. Though she took up in her delirium the King's challenge with a wild cry, "Aye, draw and defend yourself!" she realized nothing but his confession of love for Nell.

The scene was like a great blur before her eyes.

She rushed upon the King and by him, she scarce knew how. Their swords harmlessly clashed; that was all.

The cries had been taken up without. "The guard! The guard!" "Treason!" "Treason!"

The air was alive with voices.

Nell ran up the steps leading to a French window, which opened upon a tiny railed balcony. Below, one story only, lay a soft carpet of greensward, shimmering in the moonlight. With her sword, she struck the frail sash, which instantly yielded.

Meantime, the room had filled with courtiers, guards and gallants, who had rushed in, sword and spear in hand, to guard the King.

As the glass shivered and flew wide, under the point of Nell's blade, all eyes turned toward her and all blades quivered threateningly in the air.

Buckingham was first to ascend the steps in pursuit. He was disarmed — more through the superiority of Nell's position than through the dexterity of her wrist.

Then for the first time, she realized her danger. Her eyes staring from their sockets, she drew back from her murderous pursuers, and, in startled accents, she knew not why, screamed in supplication, with hands uplifted:

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!"

The storm was stayed. All paused to hear what the stranger-youth would say. Would he apologize or would he surrender?

The suspense was for but a second, though it seemed an eternity to Nell.

The open window was behind.

With a parting glance at the trembling blades, she turned quickly and with reckless daring leaped the balcony.

"T' hell with ye!" was wafted back in a rich brogue defiantly by the night.

Astonishment and consternation filled the room; but the bird had flown. Some said that the wicked farewell-speech had been Adair's, and some said not.

How it all happened, no one could tell, unless it was a miracle.

CHAPTER XV

I come, my love; I come.

ONE lonely candle, or to speak more strictly a bit of one, sputtered in its silver socket in the cosy drawing-room; and a single moonbeam found its way in through the draperies of the window leading to the terrace and to St. James's Park.

Moll lay upon a couch asleep; but it was a restless sleep.

The voice of a town-crier resounded faintly across the park: "Midnight; and all is well."

She started up and rubbed her eyes in a bewildered way.

"The midnight crier!" she thought; and there was a troubled expression in her face. "I have been asleep and the candle's nearly out."

She jumped to her feet and hastily lighted two or three of its more substantial mates, of which there was an abun-

dance in the rich candelabra about the room.

A cricket in a crevice startled her. She ran to the window and looked anxiously out upon the park, then hastened to the door, with equal anxiety, lest it might be unlocked. Every shadow was to her feverish fancy a spirit of evil or of death.

"I wish Nell would come," she thought. "The ghosts and skeletons fairly swarm in this old house at midnight; and I am all alone to-night. It's different when Nell's about. The goblins are afraid of her merry laugh. Boo! I am cold all over. I am afraid to stand still, and I am afraid to move."

She ran again to the window and this time pulled it open. The moonlight instantly flooded the room, dimming the candles which she had lighted. She saw her shadow, and started back in horror.

"Some one glided behind the old oak in the park," she cried aloud, for the company of her voice. "Oh, oh! Nell will be murdered! I begged her not to go to Portsmouth's ball. She said she just wanted to

peep in and pay her respects to the hostess. Moll! You better pray."

She fell upon her knees and reverently lifted her hands and eyes in prayer.

Something fell in the room with a heavy thud. She shut her eyes tight and prayed harder. The object of her fear was a long gray boot, which had been thrown in at the window and had fallen harmlessly by her side. It was followed in an instant by its mate, equally harmless yet equally dreadful.

A jaunty figure, assisted by a friendly shoulder, then bounded over the balustrade and rested with a sigh of relief just within the window-opening. It was Nell, returning from the wars; she was pale, almost death-like. The evening's excitement, her daring escapade and more especially its exciting finish had taken hold of her in earnest. Her dainty little self was paying the penalty. She was all of a tremble.

"Safe home at last!" she cried wearily. "Heaven reward you, Strings."

From below the terrace, without the

window, responded the fiddler, in sympathetic, loving tones: "Good night, Mistress Nell; and good sleep."

"Good night, comrade," answered Nell, as she almost fell into the room, calling faintly: "Moll! Moll! What are you doing, Moll?"

Moll closed her eyes tighter and prayed still more fervently.

"Praying for Nell," her trembling lips mechanically replied.

"Humph!" cried Nell, half fainting, throwing herself upon the couch. "There's no spirit in this flesh worth praying for. Some wine, some wine; and the blessing after."

The command brought Moll to her senses and she realized that it was really Nell who had entered thus unceremoniously. She rushed to her for safety, like a frightened deer to the lake.

"Nell, dear Nell!" she cried. "You are ill."

"Wine, wine, I say," again fell in peremptory tones from the half-reclining Nell.

Moll glanced in dismay at her bootless mistress: her garments all awry; her sword ill sheathed; her cloak uncaught from the shoulder and half used, petticoat-like, as a covering for her trembling limbs; her hair dishevelled; her cheeks pale; her wild eyes, excitement-strained, staring from their sockets.

"You are wounded; you are going to die," she cried. "Moll will be all alone in the world again."

Her hands shook more than Nell's as she filled a glass half full of wine and passed it to her mistress.

"To the brim, girl, to the brim," commanded Nell, reviving at the prospect of the draught. "There!"

She tossed off the drink in gallant fashion: "I tell you, sweetheart, we men need lots of stimulating."

"You are all of a tremble," continued Moll.

"Little wonder!" sighed Nell. "These braveries are a trifle chilly, sweet mouse. Boo!" She laughed hysterically, while Moll closed the window. "You see, I

never was a man before, and I had all that lost time to make up—acres of oats to scatter in one little night. Open my throat; I cannot breathe. Take off my sword. The wars are done, I hope." She startled Moll, who was encasing her mistress's pretty feet in a pair of dainty shoes, with another wild, hilarious laugh. "Moll," she continued, "I was the gayest mad-cap there. The sex were wild for me. I knew their weak points of attack, lass. If I had been seeking a mate, I could have made my market of them all and started a harem."

She seemed to forget all her dangers past in the recollection.

"Wicked girl," said Moll, pouting reprovingly.

"Oh, I am a jolly roisterer, little one," laughed Nell, in reply, as with cavalier-strides she crossed the room. She threw herself upon the table and proceeded to boast of her doings for Moll's benefit, swinging her feet meanwhile. "I ran the gamut. I had all the paces of the truest cavalier. I could tread a measure, swear

like one from the wars, crook my elbow, lie, gamble, fight—Fight? Did I say fight?"

She hid her curly head in her hands and sobbed spasmodically.

"You have been in danger!" exclaimed Moll, fearfully.

"Danger!" repeated Nell, breaking out afresh. "I taught the King a lesson he will dream about, my sweet, though it near cost me my life. He loves me, d'ye hear; he loves me, pretty one! Dance, Moll, dance—Dance, I say! I could fly for very joy!"

With the tears still wet upon her cheeks, she seized Moll by both hands and whirled the astonished girl wildly about the room, until she herself reeled for want of breath. Then, catching at a great carved oaken chair, she fell into it and cried and laughed alternately.

"Nell, Nell," gasped Moll, as she too struggled for breath; "one minute you laugh and then you cry. Have you lost your wits?"

"I only know," exulted Nell, "I made

him swear his love for Nell to Portsmouth's face. I made him draw his sword for Nell."

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed Moll, aghast. "You did not draw yourself? A sword against the King is treason."

"Ods-bodikins, I know not!" answered Nell. "I know not what I did or said. I was mad, mad! All I remember is: there was a big noise—a million spears and blunderbusses turned upon poor me! Gad! I made a pretty target, girl."

"A million spears and blunderbusses!" echoed Moll, her eyes like saucers.

"An army, child, an army!" continued Nell, in half-frantic accents. "I did not stop to count them. Then, next I knew, I was in my coach, with dear old Strings beside me. The horses flew. We alighted at the Chapel, tiptoed about several corners to break the scent; then I took off my shoes and stole up the back way like a good and faithful husband. Oh, I did the whole thing in cavalier-style, sweetheart. But, 'twixt us, Moll," and she spoke with a mysterious, confidential air, "—I

would n't have it go further for worlds — Adair is a coward, a monstrous coward! He ran!"

As if to prove the truth of her words, at a sudden, sharp, shrill sound from the direction of the park, the sad remnant of Adair clutched Moll frantically; and both girls huddled together with startled faces and bated breaths.

"Hark! What is that?" whispered Nell.

"The men, perchance, I told you of," answered Moll; "they 've spied about the house for weeks."

"Nonsense, you little goose," remonstrated Nell, though none too bravely; "some of your ex-lovers nailing their bleeding hearts to the trees."

"No, no; listen!" exclaimed Moll, frantically, as the noise grew louder. "They 're in the entry."

"In the entry!" stammered Nell; and she almost collapsed at the thought of more adventures. "I wish we were in bed, with our heads under the sheet."

"Here is your sword," said Moll, as she

brought Nell the sharp weapon, held well at arm's length for fear of it.

"Oh, yes, my sword!" exclaimed Nell, perking up—for an instant only. "I never thought of my sword; and this is one of the bravest swords I ever drew. I am as weak as a woman, Moll."

"Take heart," said Moll, encouraging her from the rear, as Nell brandished the glittering blade in the direction of the door. "You know you faced an army to-night."

"True," replied Nell, her courage oozing out at her finger-tips, "but then I was a man, and had to seem brave, whether I was or no. Who's there?" she called faintly. "Who's there? Support me, Moll. Beau Adair is on his last legs."

Both stood listening intently and trembling from top to toe.

A score of rich voices, singing harmoniously, broke upon the night.

The startled expression on Nell's face changed instantly to one of fearless, roguish merriment. She was her old self again. She tossed the sword contemptuously

upon the floor, laughing in derision now at her companion's fear.

"A serenade! A serenade!" she cried. "Moll — Why, Moll, what feared ye, lass? Come!" She ran gaily to the window and peeped out. "Oh, ho, masqueraders from the moon. Some merry crew, I'll be bound. I am generous. I'll give thee all but one, sweet mouse. The tall knight in white for me! I know he's gallant, though his vizor's down. Marry, he is their captain, I trow; and none but a captain of men shall be captain of my little heart."

"It is Satan and his imps," cried Moll, attempting to draw Nell from the window.

"Tush, little one," laughed Nell, reprovingly. "Satan is my warmest friend. Besides, they cannot cross the moat. The ramparts are ours. The draw-bridge is up."

In a merry mood, she threw a piece of drapery, mantle-like, about Adair's shoulders, quite hiding them, and, decapitating a grim old suit of armour, placed the helmet on her head. Thus garbed, she threw the window quickly open and stepped

boldly upon the ledge, within full view of the band beneath. As the moonlight gleamed upon her helmet, one might have fancied her a goodly knight of yore; and, indeed, she looked quite formidable.

"Nell, what are you doing?" called Moll, wildly, from a point of safety. "They can see and shoot you."

"Tilly-vally, girl," replied Nell, undaunted now that she could see that there was no danger, "we'll parley with the enemy in true feudal style. We'll teach them we have a man about the house. Ho, there, strangers of the night — breakers of the King's peace and the slumbers of the righteous! Brawlers, knaves; would ye raise honest men from their beds at such an hour? What means this jargon of tipsy voices? What want ye?"

A chorus of throats without demanded, in muffled accents: "Drink!" "Drink!" "Sack!" "Rhenish!"

"Do ye think this a tavern, knaves?" responded Nell, in a husky, mannish voice. "Do ye think this a vintner's? There are no topers here. Jackanapes,

revellers; away with you, or we'll rouse the citadel and train the guns."

Her retort was met with boisterous laughter and mocking cries of "Down with the doors!" "Break in the windows!"

This was a move Nell had not anticipated. She jumped from the ledge, or rather tumbled into the room, nervously dropping her disguise upon the floor.

"Heaven preserve us," she said to Moll, with quite another complexion in her tone, "they are coming in! Oh, Moll, Moll, I did not think they would dare."

Moll closed the sashes and bolted them, then hugged Nell close.

"Ho, there, within!" came, in a guttural voice, now from without the door.

"Yes?" Nell tried to say; but the word scarce went beyond her lips.

Again in guttural tones came a second summons—"Nell! Nell!"

Nell turned to Moll for support and courage, whispering: "Some arrant knave calls Nell at this hour." Then, assuming an attitude of bravery, with fluttering heart, she answered, as best she could,

in a forced voice: "Nell's in bed!"

"Yes, Nell's in bed," echoed the constant Moll. "Everybody's in bed. Call to-morrow!"

"No trifling, wench!" commanded the voice without, angrily. "Down with the door!"

"Stand close, Moll," entreated Nell, as she answered the would-be intruder with the question:

"Who are ye? Who are ye?"

"Old Rowley himself!" replied the guttural voice.

This was followed by hoarse laughter from many throats.

"The King—as I thought!" whispered Nell. "Good lack; what shall I do with Adair? Plague on't, he'll be mad if I keep him waiting, and madder if I let him in. Where are your wits, Moll? Run for my gown; fly—fly!"

Moll hastened to do the bidding.

Nell rushed to the entry-door, in frantic agitation.

"The bolt sticks, Sire," she called, pretending to struggle with the door, hoping

so to stay his Majesty until she should have time to dispose of poor Adair. "How can I get out of these braveries?" she then asked herself, tugging awkwardly at one part of the male attire and then at another. "I don't know which end of me to begin on first."

Moll re-entered the room with a bundle of pink in her arms, which turned out to be a flowing, silken robe, trimmed with lace.

"Here is the first I found," she said breathlessly.

Nell motioned to her nervously to put it upon the couch.

"Help me out of this coat," she pleaded woefully.

Moll took off the coat and then assisted Nell to circumscribe with the gown, from heels to head, her stunning figure, neatly encased in Adair's habit, which now consisted only of a jaunty shirt of white, gray breeches, shoes and stockings.

"Marry, I would I were a fairy with a magic wand; I could befuddle men's eyes easier," Nell lamented.

The King knocked again upon the door sharply.

"Patience, my liege," entreated Nell, drawing her gown close about her and muttering with personal satisfaction: "There, there; that hides a multitude of sins. The girdle, the girdle! Adair will not escape from this — if we can but keep him quiet; the rogue has a woman's tongue, and it will out, I fear."

She snatched up a mirror and arranged her hair as best she could in the dim light, with the cries without resounding in her ears and with Moll dancing anxiously about her.

"Down with the door," threatened the King, impatiently. "The ram; the battering ram."

"I come, my love; I come," cried Nell, in agitation, fairly running to the door to open it, but stopping aghast as her eye caught over her shoulder the sad, tell-tale condition of the room.

"'Sdeath," she called in a stage-whisper to Moll; "under the couch with Adair's coat! Patience, Sire," she be-

sought in turn the King. "Help me, Moll. How this lock has rusted — in the last few minutes. My sword!" she continued breathlessly to Moll. "My boots! My hat! My cloak!"

Moll, in her efforts to make the room presentable, was rushing hither and thither, first throwing Adair's coat beneath the couch as Nell commanded and firing the other evidences of his guilty presence, one behind one door and another behind another.

It was done.

Nell slipped the bolt and calmly took a stand in the centre of the room, drawing her flowing gown close about Adair's person. She was quite exhausted from the nervous strain, but her actress's art taught her the way to hide it. Moll, panting for breath, across the room, feigned composure as best she could.

The door opened and in strode the King and his followers.

"Welcome, royal comrades, welcome all!" said Nell, bowing graciously to her untimely visitors.

CHAPTER XVI

Ods-pitikins, my own reflection!

UPON the fine face of the King, as he entered Nell's drawing-room, was an expression of nervous bantering, not wholly unmixed with anxiety.

The slanderous Adair and his almost miraculous escape had not long weighed upon his Majesty's careless nature.

As he had not met Adair until that night or even heard of him, his heart had told him that the Irish roisterer could scarcely be a serious obstacle in the way of Nell's perfect faith, if, indeed, he had met Nell at all, which he doubted. His command to the guard to follow and overtake the youth had been more the command of the ruler than of the man. Despite himself, there had been something about the dainty peacock he could not help but like; and the bold dash for the window, the disarming of the purse-proud Buckingham,

who for many reasons displeased him, and the leap to the sward below, with the accompanying farewell, had especially delighted both his manhood and his sense of humour.

He had, therefore, dismissed Adair from his mind, except as a possible subject to banter Nell withal, or as a culprit to punish, if overtaken.

His restless spirit had chafed under the Duchess's lavish entertainment—for the best entertainment is dull to the lover whose sweetheart is absent—and he had turned instinctively from the ball to Nell's terrace, regardless of the hour and scarce noticing his constant attendants.

The night was so beautiful that their souls had found vent in song.

This serenade, however, had brought to Nell's window a wide-awake fellow, who had revealed himself in saucy talk; and the delighted cavaliers, in hope of fun, had charged jeeringly that they had outwitted the guard and had found Adair.

It was this that had brought the anxious look to the King's face; and, though his

better judgment was still unchanged, the sight of the knave at the window, together with the suggestions of his merry followers, had cast a shadow of doubt for the moment upon his soul, and he had reflected that there was much that the Irish youth had said that could not be reconciled with that better judgment.

With a careless shrug, he had, therefore, taken up the jest of his lawless crew, which coincided with his own intended purpose, and had sworn that he would turn the household out of bed without regard to pretty protests or formality of warrant. He would raise the question forthwith, in jest and earnest, and worry Nell about the boaster.

"Scurvy entertainment," he began, with frowning brow.

"Yea, my liege," explained Nell, winsomely; "you see—I did not expect the King so late, and so was unpresentable."

"It is the one you do not expect," replied Charles, dryly, "who always causes the trouble, Nell."

"We were in bed, Sire," threw in Moll,

thinking to come to the rescue of her mistress.

"Marry, truly," said Nell, catching at the cue, "—asleep, Sire, sound asleep; and our prayers said."

"Tilly-vally," exclaimed the King, "we might credit thy tongue, wench, but for the prayers. No digressions, spider Nell. My sword is in a fighting mood. 'Sdeath, call forth the knight-errant who holds thy errant heart secure for one short hour!"

"The knight of my heart!" cried Nell. "Ah, Sire, you know his name."

She looked at his Majesty with eyes of unfailing love; but the King was true to his jest.

"Yea, marry, I do," laughed Charles, tauntingly, with a wink at his companions; "a pretty piece of heraldry, a bold escutcheon, a dainty poniard—pale as a lily, and how he did sigh and drop his lids and smirk and smirk and dance your latest galliard to surpass De Grammont. Ask brother James how he did dance."

"Nay, Sire," hastily interceded the

ever-gallant Rochester, "his Highness of York has suffered enough."

York frowned at the reference; for he had been robbed of his lady at the dance by Adair. He could not forget that. Heedless of his royalty, bestowed by man, she, like the others, had followed in the train of the Irish spark, who was royal only by nature.

"Hang the coxcomb!" he snarled.

"'Slife, I will," replied Charles, slyly, "an you overtake him, brother."

"His back was shapely, Sire," observed Rochester, with quaint humour.

"Yea, and his heels!" cried the King, reflectively. "He had such dainty heels — Mercury's wings attached, to waft him on his way."

"This is moonshine madness!" exclaimed Nell, with the blandest of bland smiles. "There's none such here. By my troth, I would there were. Nay, ask Moll."

Moll did not wait to be asked.

"Not one visitor to-night," she asserted promptly.

"Odso!" cried Charles, in a mocking tone. "Whence came the Jack at the window — the brave young challenger — 'Would ye raise honest men from their beds at such an hour?'"

A burst of laughter followed the King's grave imitation of the window-boaster.

"Sire!" sighed Rochester, in like spirit. "'Do you think this a vintner's? There are no topers here.'"

Another burst of merry laughter greeted the speaker, as he punctuated his words by catching up the wine-cups from the table and clinking them gaily.

Nell's face was as solemn as a funeral.

"To your knees, minx," commanded James, grimly, "and crave mercy of your prince."

"Faith and troth," pleaded Nell, seriously, "'t was I myself with helmet and mantle on. You see, Sire, my menials were guests at Portsmouth's ball — to lend respectability."

"Saucy wag," cried the Merry Monarch. "A ball? — A battle — which would have killed thee straight!"

"It had liked to," reflected Nell, as she tartly replied: "A war of the sex without me? It was stupid, then. The Duchess missed me, I trow."

"Never fear," answered Charles, with difficulty suppressing his mirth; "you were bravely championed."

"I am sure of that," said Nell, slyly; "my King was there."

"And a bantam cock," ejaculated Charles, sarcastically, "upon whose lips 'Nell' hung familiarly."

"Some strange gallant," cried Nell, in ecstasy, "took my part before them all? Who was he, Sire? Don't tantalize me so."

She smiled, half serious, half humorous, as she pleaded in her charming way.

"A chip from the Blarney Stone," observed the King at length, ironically, "surnamed Adair!"

"Adair! Adair!" cried Nell, to the astonishment of all. "We spent our youth together. I see him in my mind's eye, Sire, throw down the gauntlet in Nell's name and defy the world for her. Fill the

cups. We'll drink to my new-found hero! Fill! Fill! To Beau Adair, as you love me, gallants! Long life to Adair!"

The cups were filled to overflowing and trembled on eager lips in response to the hostess's merry toast.

"Stay!" commanded the King, in peremptory tones. "Not a drop to a coward!"

"A coward!" cried Nell, aghast. "Adair a coward? I'll never credit it, Sire!"

She turned away, lest she reveal her merriment, as she bethought her: "He is trembling in my boots now. I can feel him shake."

"Our pledge is Nell, Nell only!" exclaimed the King, his cup high in air.

With one accord, the gallants eagerly took up the royal pledge. "Aye, aye, Nell!" "Nell!" "We'll drink to Nell!"

"You do me honour, royal gentlemen," bowed Nell, well pleased at the King's toast.

She had scarce touched the cup to her lips, however, with a mental chuckle, "Poor Adair! Here's a health to the inner man!" when her eye fell upon one of

Adair's gray boots, which Moll had failed to hide, in her excitement, now revealing itself quite plainly in the light of the many candles. She caught it adroitly on the tip of her toe and sent it whizzing through the air in the direction of poor Moll, who, fortunately, caught it in mid-air and hid it quickly beneath her apron.

The King turned at the sound; but Nell's face was as woefully unconcerned as a church-warden's at his hundredth burial.

The wine added further zest to the merry-making and the desire for sport.

"Now, fair huswife," continued Charles, his thoughts reverting to Adair, "set forth the dish, that we may carve it to our liking. 'T is a dainty bit,—lace, velvet and ruffles."

"Heyday, Sire," responded Nell, evasively, "the larder's empty."

"Devil on't," cried Charles, ferociously; "no mincing, wench. In the confusion of the ball, the bird escaped my guard by magic. We know whither the flight."

The King assumed a knowing look.

"Escaped the guard?" gasped Nell, in great surprise. "Alas, I trow some petticoat has hid him then."

"I'll stake my life upon't," observed James, who had not been heard from in some time but who had been observing the scene with decorous dignity.

"Sire, you would not injure Adair," pleaded Nell, now alert, with all her arts of fascination. "You are too generous. Blue eyes of heaven, and such a smile! Did you mark that young Irishman's smile, Sire?"

Her impudence was so bewitching that the King scarce knew whether it were jest or earnest. He sprang to his feet from the couch, where he had thrown himself after the toast to Nell, and, with some forcefulness, exclaimed:

"Odsfish, this to my teeth, rogue! Guard the doors, gallants; we'd gaze upon this paragon."

"And set him pirouetting, Sire," sardonically suggested James.

"Yea, to the tune of these fiddle-sticks,"

laughed Charles, as he unsheathed his rapier. "Search from tile to rafter."

"Aye, aye," echoed the omnipresent Rochester, "from cellar to garret."

Before, however, the command could be obeyed, even in resolution, Nell moved uneasily to a curtain which hung in the corner of the room and placed herself before it, as if to shield a hidden man.

"Sire," she pleaded fearfully, "spare him, Sire; for my sake, Sire. He is not to blame for loving me. He cannot help it. You know that, Sire!"

"Can he really be here?" muttered Charles, with clouding visage. "Saucy wench! Hey! My blood is charging full-tilt through my veins. Odsfish, we'll try his mettle once again."

"Prythee, Sire," begged Nell, "he is too noble and brave and handsome to die. I love his very image."

"Oh, ho!" cried Charles. "A silken blind for the silken bird! Hey, St. George for merry England! Come forth, thou picture of cowardice, thou vile slanderer."

He grasped Nell by the wrist and fairly

dragged her across the room. Then, rushing to the curtain, he seized its silken folds and tore it completely from its hangings — only to face himself in a large mirror. "Ods-pitikins, my own reflection!" he exclaimed, with menacing tone, though there was relief as well in his voice. He bent the point of his blade against the floor, gazed at himself in the pier-glass and looked over his shoulder at Nell, who stood in the midst of his courtiers, splitting her sides with laughter, undignified but honest.

"Rogue, rogue," he cried, "I should turn the point on thee for this trick; but England would be worse than a Puritan funeral with no Nell. Thou shalt suffer anon."

"I defy thee, Sire, and all thy imps of Satan," laughed the vixen, as she watched the King sheathe his jewelled sword. "Cast Nell in the blackest dungeon, Adair is her fellow-prisoner; outlaw Nell, Adair is her brother outlaw; off with Nell's head, off rolls Adair's. Who else can boast so true a love!"

"Thou shalt be banished the realm," decided the King, jestingly; for he was now convinced that her Adair was but a jest to tease him—a Roland for his Oliver.

"Banished!" cried Nell, with bated breath.

"Aye; beyond sea, witch!" answered the King, with pompous austerity. "Virginia shall be thy home."

"Good, good!" laughed Nell, gaily. "Sire, the men grow handsome in Virginia, and dauntless; and they tell me there are a dearth of women there. Oh, banish me at once to—What 's the name?"

"Jamestown," suggested York, recalling the one name because of its familiar sound.

"Yea, brother James," said Nell, fearlessly mimicking his brusque accent, "Jamestown."

"Savages, wild men, cannibals," scowled Charles.

"Cannibals!" cried Nell. "Marry, I should love to be a cannibal. Are there cannibals in Jamestown, brother James?

Banish me, Sire; banish me to Jamestown of all places. Up with the sails, my merry men; give me the helm! Adair will sail in the same good ship, I trow."

"Adair! I trow thou wert best at home, cannibal Nelly," determined the King.

"Then set all the men in Britain to watch me, Sire," said Nell; "for, from now on, I 'll need it."

The King shook his finger warningly at her, then leaned carelessly against the window.

"Ho there!" he cried out suddenly. "A night disturbance, a drunken brawl, beneath our very ears! Fellow-saints, what mean my subjects from their beds this hour of night? Their sovereign does the revelling for the realm. James, Rochester and all, see to 't!"

CHAPTER XVII

The day will be so happy; for I've seen you at the dawn.

THE room was quickly cleared, the King's courtiers jostling one another in their efforts to carry out the royal bidding.

Charles turned with a merry laugh and seized Nell in his arms almost fiercely.

"A subterfuge!" he cried eagerly. "Nell, quick; one kiss!"

"Nay; you question my constancy tonight," said Nell, sadly, as she looked into his eyes, with the look of perfect love. "You do not trust me."

"I do, sweet Nell," protested the King, earnestly.

"You bring me Portsmouth's lips," said Nell, with sad reproof.

"I left her dance for you," replied the King, drawing her closer to him.

"At near sunrise, Sire," sighed Nell, reprovingly, as she drew back the curtain

and revealed the first gray streaks of the breaking light of day.

"Nay, do not tantalize me, Nell," besought the King, throwing himself upon the couch. "I am sad to-night."

The woman's forgiving heart was touched with sympathy. Her eyes sought his sadly beautiful face. She ran to him, fell upon her knees and kissed his hand tenderly.

"Tantalize my King!" she cried. "The day will be so happy; for I've seen you at the dawn." There was all the emotional fervour and pathetic tenderness which the great composer has compressed into the love-music of "Tristan and Isolde" in her voice.

"My crown is heavy, Nell," he continued. "Heaven gives us crowns, but not the eye to see the ending of our deeds."

"God sees them," said Nell. "Ah, Sire, I thank the Maker of the world for giving a crown to one whom I respect and love."

"And I curse it," cried the King, with

earnest eyes; "for 'tis the only barrier to our united love. It is the sparkling spider in the centre of a great web of intrigue and infamy."

"You make me bold to speak. Cut the web, Sire, which binds thy crown to France. There is the only danger."

"Thou art wrong, Nelly, wrong!" He spoke in deep, firm accents. "I have decided otherwise."

He rose abruptly, his brow clouded with thought. She took his hand tenderly.

"Then, change your mind, Sire," she pleaded; "for I can prove—"

"What, girl?" he asked eagerly, his curiosity awakened by her manner.

Nell did not respond. To continue would reveal Adair, and she could not think of that.

"What, I say?" again asked Charles, impatiently.

"To-morrow, Sire," laughed Nell, evasively.

"Aye, to-morrow and to-morrow!" petulantly repeated the King.

He was about to demand a direct re-

ply but was stayed by the sound of a struggle without.

It befell in the nick of time for Nell, as all things, indeed, in life seemed to befall in the nick of time for her. The impious huswives shook their heads and attributed it to the evil influence; the pious huswives asserted it was providential; Nell herself laughingly declared it was her lucky star.

"Ho, without there!" Charles cried, impatiently—almost angrily—at the interruption. "Whence comes this noisy riot?"

James, Rochester and the others unceremoniously re-entered.

"Pardon, Sire," explained the Duke of York; "the guard caught but now an armed ruffian prowling by the house. They report they stayed him on suspicion of his looks and insolence."

"Adair! Adair! My life upon't!" laughed the King, ever ready for sport. "Set him before us."

An officer of the guard departed quickly to bring in the offender. The courtiers

took up the King's cry most readily; and there was a general cackle of "Adair!" "Adair!" "A trial!" "Sire!" "Bring in the coward!"

Nell stood in the midst of the scene, the picture of demure innocence.

"They've caught Adair!" she whispered to Moll, mischievously.

"Aye, gallants," cried the Merry Monarch, approvingly, "we'll form a Court of Inquiry. This table shall be our bench, on which we'll hem and haw and puff and look judicial. Odsfish, we will teach Radamanthus and Judge Jeffreys ways of terrorizing."

He sprang upon the table, which creaked somewhat beneath the royal burden, and assumed the austere, frowning brow of worldly justice.

"*Oyer*, *oyer*, all ye who have grievances—" cried the garrulous Rochester in the husky tones of the crier, who most generally assumes that he is the whole court and oftentimes should be.

"Mistress Nell," commanded the royal judge, summoning Nell to the bar, "thou

shalt be counsel for the prisoner; Adair's life hangs upon thy skill to outwit the law."

"Or bribe the judge, Sire?" suggested Nell, demurely.

"Not with thy traitor lips," retorted Charles, with the injured dignity of a petty justice about to commit a flash of true wit for contempt of court.

"Traitor lips?" cried Nell, sadly. "By my troth, I never kissed Adair. I confess, I tried, your Majesty; but I could not."

"Have a care," replied the King, in a tone which indicated that the fires of suspicion still smouldered in his breast; "I am growing jealous."

Nell fell upon one knee and stretched forth her arms suppliantly.

"Adair is in such a tight place, Sire, he can scarcely breathe," she pleaded, with the zeal of a barrister hard-working for his first fee in her voice, "much less speak for himself. Mercy!"

"We will have justice; not mercy," replied the court, with a sly wink at Roch-

ester. "Guilty or not guilty, wench?"

"Not guilty, Sire! Did you ever see the man who was?"

The King laughed despite himself, followed by his ever-aping courtiers.

"I'll plead for the Crown," asserted the grim James, with great vehemence, "to rid the realm of this dancing-Jack."

"Thou hast cause, brother," laughed the King. "Rochester, thou shalt sit by us here."

Rochester sprang, with a contented chuckle, into a chair on the opposite side of the table to that upon which his Majesty was holding his mock-court and seated himself upon its high back, so poised as not to fall. From this lofty bench, with a queer gurgle, to say nothing of a swelling of the chest, and with an approving glance from his Majesty, he added his mite to the all-inspiring dignity of the revellers' court.

"Judge Rochester!" continued the King, slapping him with his glove, across the table. "Judge—of good ale. We'll confer with the cups, imbibe the statutes

and drink in the law. Set the rascal before us."

In obedience to the command, a man well muffled with a cloak was forced into the room, a guard at either arm.

Behind them, taking advantage of the open door to appease their curiosity, crowded many hangers-on of courtdom, among whom was Strings, who had met the revellers some distance from the house and had returned with them.

"Hold off your hands, knaves," commanded the prisoner, who was none other than Hart, the player, indignant at the detention.

"Silence, rogue!" commanded the King. "Thy name?"

"Sire!" cried Hart, throwing off his mantle and glancing for the first time at the judge's face. He sank immediately upon one knee, bowing respectfully.

"Jack Hart!" cried one and all, craning their necks in surprise and expectation.

"'Slife, a spy upon our merry-making!" exclaimed the displeased monarch. "What means this prowling, sir?"

"Pardon, pardon, my reply, your Majesty," humbly importuned the player. "Blinded by passion, I might say that I should regret."

"Your strange behaviour and stranger looks have meaning, sir," cried the King, impatiently. "Out with it! These are too dangerous times to withhold your thoughts from your King."

"No need for commands, Sire," entreated Hart. "The words are trembling on my lips and will out themselves in spite of me. At Portsmouth's ball, an hour past, I o'erheard that fop Adair boast to-night a midnight rendezvous here with Nell."

Nell placed her hands upon her heart.

"This—my old friend," she reflected sadly.

"Our jest turned earnest," cried Charles. "Well? Well?" he questioned, in peremptory tones.

"I could not believe my ears, Sire," the prisoner continued, faltering. "I watched to refute the lie—"

"Yes—yes—" exhorted the King, in expectation.

"I cannot go on."

"Knave, I command!"

"I saw Adair enter this abode at midnight." Hart's head fell, full of shame, upon his breast.

"'Sblood," muttered the King, scarce mindful that his words might be audible to those about him, "my heart stands still as if 't were knifed. My pretty golden-head, my bonnie Nell!" He turned sharply toward the player. "Your words are false, false, sir! Kind Heaven, they must be."

"Pardon, Sire," pleaded Hart; "I know not what I do or say. Only love for Nell led me to this spot."

"Love!" cried Nell, with the irony of sadness. "Oh, inhuman, to spy out my ways, resort to mean device, involve my honour, and call the motive love!"

"You are cruel, cruel, Nell," sobbed Hart; and he turned away his eyes. He could not look at her.

"Love!" continued Nell, bitterly. "True love would come alone, filled with gentle admonition. I pity you, friend Hart, that God has made you thus!"

"No more, no more!" Hart quite broke beneath the strain.

"Dost hear, dost hear?" cried Charles, in ecstasy, deeply affected by Nell's exposition of true love. "Sir, you are the second to-night to belie the dearest name in England. You shall answer well to me."

"Ask the lady, Sire," pleaded Hart, in desperation. "I'll stake my life upon her reply."

"Nell?—Nell?" questioned the King; for he could scarce refuse to accept her word when a player had placed unquestioned faith in it.

Nell hid her face in her silken kerchief and burst into seeming spasmodic sobs of grief. "Sire!" was all the response the King could hear. He trembled violently and his face grew white. He did not know that Nell's tears were merry laughs.

"Her tears convict her," exclaimed Hart, triumphantly.

"I'll not believe it," cried the King.

Nell became more hysterical. She sobbed and sobbed, as though her heart would break, her face buried in her hands

and her flying curls falling over and hiding all.

"Adair's sides are aching," she chuckled, in apparent convulsions of sorrow. "He's laughing through Nell's tears."

Meanwhile, Moll had been standing by the window; and, though she was watching eagerly the exciting scene within the room, she could not fail to note the sound of galloping horses and the rattling of a heavy coach on the roadway without.

"A coach and six at break-neck speed," she cried, "have landed at the door. A cavalier alights."

"Time some one arrived," thought Nell, as she glanced at herself in the mirror, to see that Adair was well hidden, and to arrange her curls, to bewitch the new arrivals, whosoever they might be.

As the cavalier dashed up the path, in the moonlight, Moll recognized the Duke of Buckingham, and at once announced his name.

"Ods-pitikins!" exclaimed Charles, angrily. "No leisure for Buckingham now. We have other business."

He had scarce spoken, however, when Buckingham, unceremoniously and almost breathless, entered the room.

"How now?" cried the King, fiercely, as the Duke fell on his knee before him; for his temper had been wrought to a high pitch.

"Pardon, your Majesty," besought his lordship, in nervous accents. "My mission will excuse my haste and interruption. Your ear I crave one moment. Sire, I am told Nell has to-night secreted in this house a lover!"

"Another one!" whispered Nell to Moll.

"'Tis hearsay," cried the King, now at fever-heat, "the give-and-take of gossips! I'll none of it."

"My witness, Sire!" answered Buckingham.

He turned toward the door; and there, to the astonishment of all, stood the Duchess of Portsmouth, who had followed him from the coach, a lace mantilla, caught up in her excitement, protecting her shapely shoulders and head.

As the assembled courtiers looked upon the beautiful rivals, standing, as they did, face to face before the King, and realized the situation, their faces grew grave, indeed.

The suspense became intense.

"The day of reckoning's come," thought Nell, as she met with burning glances the Duchess's eyes.

"Speak, your grace," exhorted Buckingham. "The King attends you."

"Nay, before all, my lord?" protested Portsmouth, with pretended delicacy. "I could not do Madame Gwyn so much injustice."

"If your speech concerns me," observed Nell, mildly, "out with it boldly. My friends will consider the source."

"Speak, and quickly!" commanded Charles.

"I would rather lose my tongue," still protested the Duchess, "than speak such words of any one; but my duty to your Majesty—"

"No preludes," interrupted the King; and he meant it, too. He was done with

trifling, and the Duchess saw it.

"My servants," she said, with a virtuous look, "passing this abode by chance, this very night, saw at a questionable hour a strange cavalier entering the boudoir of Madame Gwyn!"

"She would make my honour the price of her revenge," thought Nell, her eyes flashing. "She shall rue those words, or Adair's head and mine are one for naught."

"What say you to this, Nell?" asked the King, the words choking in his throat.

"Sire,—I—I—" answered Nell, evasively. "There's some mistake or knavery!"

"She hesitates," interpolated the Duchess, eagerly.

"You change colour, wench," cried Charles, his heart, indeed, again upon the rack. "Ho, without there! Search the house."

An officer entered quickly to obey the mandate.

"Stay, Sire," exclaimed Nell, raising herself to her full height, her hot, trembling lips compressed, her cheeks aflame.

"My oath, I have not seen Adair's face this night."

Her words fell upon the assemblage like thunder from a June-day sky. The King's face brightened. The Duchess's countenance grew pale as death.

"*Mon Dieu!* Adair!" she gasped in startled accents to Lord Buckingham, attendant at her side. "Could it be he my servants saw? The packet! Fool! Why did I give it him?"

Buckingham trembled violently. He was even more startled than Portsmouth; for he had more to lose. England was his home and France was hers.

"The scales are turning against us," he whispered. "Throw in this ring for safety. Nell's gift to Adair; you understand."

He slipped, unobserved, upon the Duchess's finger the jewelled ring the King had given to Almahyde among the roses at the performance of "Granada."

"Yes! Yes! 'T is my only chance," she answered, catching at his meaning; for her wits were of the sharpest in intrigue and cunning, and she possessed the bold-

ness too to execute her plans.

She approached the King, with the confident air possessed by great women who have been bred at court.

"Your Majesty recognizes this ring?" she asked in mildest accents.

"The one I gave to Nell!" answered the astonished King.

"The one Adair this night gave to me," said Portsmouth, calmly.

"'Tis false!" cried Nell, who could restrain her tongue no longer. "I gave that ring to dear old Strings."

"A rare jewel to bestow upon a fiddler," said the Duchess, sarcastically.

"It is true," said Strings, who had wormed his way through the group at mention of his name and now stood the meek central figure at the strange hearing. "My little ones were starving, Sire; and Nell gave me the ring—all she had. They could not eat the gold; so I sold it to the Duke of Buckingham!"

"We are lost," whispered Buckingham to Portsmouth, scarce audibly.

"Coward!" sneered the Duchess, con-

temptuously. "I am not ready to sail for France so soon."

The King stood irresolute. Events had transpired so quickly that he scarce knew what it was best to do. His troubled spirit longed for a further hearing, while his heart demanded the ending of the scene with a peremptory word.

Before he could decide upon his course, the Duchess had swept across the room, with queenly grace.

"Our hostess will pardon my eyes for wandering," she said, undaunted; "but her abode is filled with pleasant surprises. Sire, here is a piece of handiwork."

She knelt by the couch, and drew from under it a coat of gray, one sleeve of which had caught her eye.

Nell looked at Moll with reproving glances.

"Marry, 't is Strings's, of course," continued Portsmouth, dangling the coat before the wondering eyes of all. "The lace, the ruffle, becomes his complexion. He fits everything here so beautifully."

As she turned the garment slowly about,

she caught sight of a package of papers protruding from its inner pocket, sealed with her own seal. For the first time, the significance of the colour of the coat came home to her.

"*Mon Dieu*," she cried, "Adair's coat. —The packet!"

Her fingers sought the papers eagerly; but Nell's eye and hand were too quick for her.

"Not so fast, dear Duchess," said Nell, sweetly, passing the little packet to his Majesty. "Our King must read these papers—and between the lines as well."

"Enough of this!" commanded Charles. "What is it?"

"Some papers, Sire," said Nell, pointedly, "given for a kiss and taken with a kiss. I have not had time to read them."

"Some family papers, Sire," asserted the Duchess, with assumed indifference, "stolen from my house."

She would have taken them from his Majesty, so great, indeed, was her boldness; but Nell again stayed her.

"Aye, stolen," said Nell, sharply; "but

by the hostess herself—from her unsuspecting, royal guest. There, Sire, stands the only thief!" She pointed accusingly at Portsmouth.

"My signature!" cried Charles, as he ran his eye down a parchment. "The treaties! No more Parliaments for England. I agreed to that."

"I agree to that myself," said Nell, roguishly. "England's King is too great to need Parliaments. The King should have a confidential adviser, however—not French," and she cast a defiant glance at Portsmouth, "but English. Read on; read on."

She placed her pretty cheek as near as possible to the King's as she followed the letters over his shoulder.

"A note to Bouillon!" he said, perusing the parchments further. "Charles consents to the fall of Luxembourg. I did not sign all this. I see it all: Louis's ambition to rule the world, England's King debased by promises won and royal contracts made with a clever woman—forgery mixed with truth. Sweet Heaven, what have I done!"

"The papers have not gone, Sire," blandly remarked Nell.

"Thanks to you, my Nell," said Charles. He addressed Portsmouth sharply: "Madame, your coach awaits you."

"But, Sire," replied the Duchess, who was brave to the last, "Madame Gwyn has yet Adair to answer for!"

"Adair will answer for himself!" cried Nell, triumphantly.

She threw aside the pink gown and stood as Adair before the astonished eyes of all.

"At your service," she said, bowing sweetly to the Duchess.

"A player's trick!" cried Portsmouth, haughtily, as a parting shot of contempt.

"Yes, Portsmouth," replied Nell, still in sweetest accents, "to show where lies the true and where the false."

"You are a witch," hissed Portsmouth.

"You are the King's true love," exclaimed the Merry Monarch. "To my arms, Nell, to my arms; for you first taught me the meaning of true love! Buckingham, you forget your courtesy.

Her grace wishes to be escorted to her coach."

"*Bon voyage*, madame," said Nell, demurely, as the Duchess took Buckingham's arm and departed.

The King's eyes fell upon the player, Hart, who was still in custody.

"Away with this wretch!" he cried, incensed at his conduct. "I am not done with him."

"Forgive him, Sire," interceded Nell. "He took his cue from Heaven, and good has come of it."

"True, Nell," said the King, mercifully. Then he turned to Hart: "You are free; but henceforth act the knave only on the stage." Hart bowed with shame and withdrew.

"Sire, Sire," exclaimed Strings, forgetting his decorum in his eagerness.

"Well, Strings?" inquired the King, good-humouredly; for there was now no cloud in his sky.

"Let me play the exit for the villains?" he pleaded unctuously. "The old fiddle is just bursting with tunes."

"You shall, Strings," replied his Majesty, "and on a Cremona. From to-day, you lead the royal orchestra."

"Odsbud," cried Strings, gleefully, "I can offer Jack Hart an engagement."

"Just retribution, Strings," laughed Nell, happily. "Can you do as much for Nell, and forgive her, Sire?"

"It is I who should ask your pardon, Nell," exclaimed the King, ecstatically, throwing both arms passionately about her. "You are Charles's queen; you should be England's."

So the story ends, as all good stories should, in a perfect, unbroken dream of love.

EPILOGUE

Spoken by Miss Crosman for the first time in New York at the Bijou Theatre on the evening of October 9, 1900:

GOOD friends, before we end the play,
I beg you all a moment stay:
I warn my sex, by Nell's *affair,*
Against a rascal called Adair!

If lovers' hearts you'd truly scan,
Odsfish, perk up, and be a man!

Hazelton, George C. Jr.

Mistress Nell

5-897

DATE	ISSUED TO